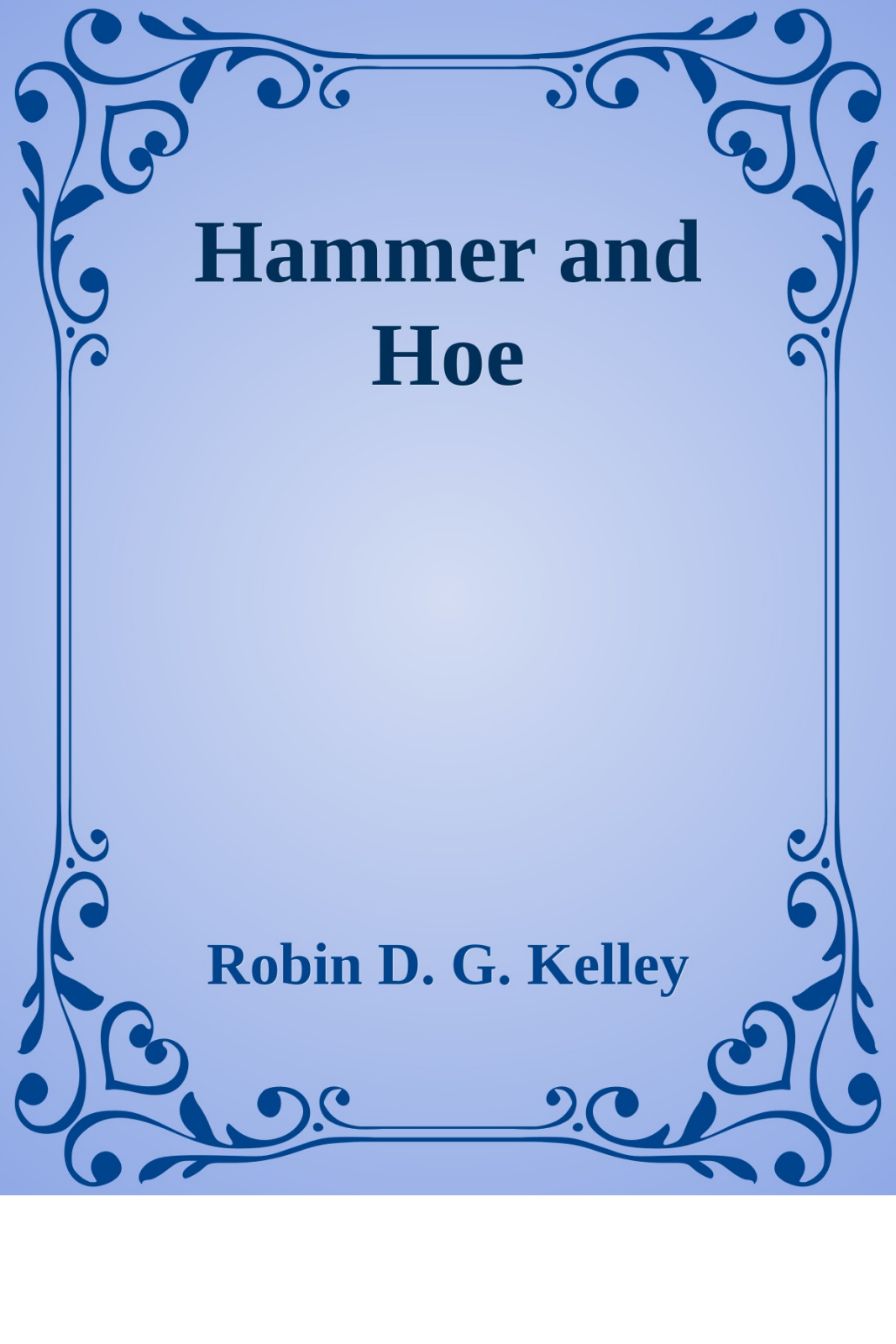




Hammer and Hoe

Robin D. G. Kelley

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ROBIN D. G. KELLEY

HAMMER AND HOE

ALABAMA COMMUNISTS DURING THE GREAT DEPRESSION

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition *With a New Preface by the Author*



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Alabama Communists during the Great Depression

Robin D. G. Kelley

Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition
With a New Preface by the Author

The University of North Carolina Press
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Dedicated to the young people of Ferguson, St. Louis, Baltimore, Miami, New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, Oakland, Gaza and the West Bank, Sao Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, Dakar, Cairo, Ayotzinapa and Mexico City, Santiago, Athens, Lisbon, Madrid, and elsewhere, fighting for justice, democracy, peace, and an end to human misery.

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Preface to the Twenty-Fifth Anniversary Edition

The Strange Career of *Hammer and Hoe*

How is this for timing: the post–Cold War and the publication of *Hammer and Hoe* are both twenty-five years old. Or to put it another way, I published an entire book about the trials, tribulations, and virtues of a Communist movement in the U.S. South just as Communism—in its Soviet variety, at least—took its last breath. The demise of the USSR should have no bearing on the historical value of Communism, but in the early 1990s, few conservative or liberal critics saw any reason to revisit Communist movements besides performing an autopsy. Given how obsessed with the present our culture is, once Communists ceased to be our greatest existential threat, they became, at best, relics of the past and, at worst, the twentieth century’s biggest losers.

Yet I’d be lying if I said *Hammer and Hoe* was conceived as a purely academic contribution, unburdened by presentist concerns. The book’s genesis cannot be understood absent an understanding of the political and personal context in which it was written. I felt a fierce urgency to study black working-class radicalism, not because the old Soviet states were crumbling in the face of revolt, but because the apartheid state of South Africa was succumbing to a massive multiracial movement—a movement in which Left trade unions and the South African Communist Party played leading roles. Far more than the fall of the Berlin Wall, Nelson Mandela’s release from prison and Namibian independence, both in 1990, best represented the politics behind this book. Even the title was inspired by events in Africa. In 1970, the People’s Republic of the Congo, a self-declared “Marxist-Leninist socialist state,” adopted the symbol of a crossed hammer and hoe for its flag.¹ (Coincidentally, the regime and its flag were replaced in 1992—another Cold War casualty.) I had entered UCLA’s graduate program in 1983 as an Africanist. Modern South Africa was my chosen field, and the ways in which black workers struggled under regimes of racial capitalism—how they resisted exploitation, what they fought for, how they came to define political liberation—was my primary obsession. For my doctorate, I planned to write a social history of black radical politics in South Africa that would be attentive to the culture and ideas of ordinary people.

There was little indication that the 1980s would be the last decade of the Cold War. This was the era of Reaganism and Thatcherism, new imperialist wars, and new revolutions in Africa, Asia, and Latin America; of capital flight, the erosion of the welfare state, neoliberal privatization schemes, the weakening of antidiscrimination laws and policies; of a wave of police and vigilante killings that struck our communities with the force of a cluster bomb. The decade, in fact, opened with police killings and nonlethal acts of police brutality emerging as a central political issue, resulting in a massive urban insurrection in Liberty City, Florida, in May 1980. The 1980s also witnessed genuine efforts by radicals to build multiracial solidarity in the unlikely realm of electoral politics. The election of Mayor Harold Washington in Chicago in 1983, along with Jesse Jackson's 1984 presidential bid, held the radical promise of Rainbow Coalition politics.

At the same time, like many of my fellow students in the early to mid-1980s, I was involved in the anti-apartheid movement. By the time I set foot on UCLA's campus in the fall of 1983, the boycott and divestment movement against South Africa was in full swing. I was active in a sectarian party pursuing dreams of socialist revolution, elected president of UCLA's African Activists Association, and chaired the Ad Hoc Committee to Keep South Africa Out of the Olympics, which were held in Los Angeles in the summer of 1984.² We were part of a broad coalition of students calling on the University of California to divest its holdings from South Africa. We built makeshift shantytowns on campus, sat in at the South African Consulate, educated our community, built momentum, and by the summer of 1986 persuaded the U.C. Regents to divest their \$3.1 billion worth of holdings from South Africa and Namibia. While we won that battle, none of my comrades believed divestment alone would topple apartheid and birth a new democratic state founded on the principles of the Freedom Charter. We knew that the struggle inside of South Africa mattered most. And given the experiences of Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau, Angola, and Namibia, we knew it would be bloody. The United Democratic Front, the African National Congress, and the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) demonstrated the power of massive popular resistance, strikes, civil disobedience—the power of people to stop South Africa's racial regime from functioning.

Though it may seem hard to believe now, these were revolutionary times, politically and theoretically. In the fog of negotiating movement work and school work, I embraced a group of radical thinkers who believed another world was possible. C. L. R. James, W. E. B. Du Bois, Walter Rodney, Amílcar Cabral, Manning Marable, Audre Lorde, June Jordan, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Angela Davis,

Chinweizu, Vincent Harding, Cornel West, Barbara Smith, Stuart Hall, Edward Said, and Samir Amin, among others, wrote about the ravages of racial capitalism, the violence of patriarchy, the futility of parochial politics in the face of global imperialism, and the absolute necessity to resist.³ But resistance to what end? I began to think about the persistent failure of socialist and Communist movements to mobilize black people. And then I encountered Cedric Robinson's extraordinary book, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (1983), which exposed a fundamental fallacy in the way I framed the problem.⁴ It was never about a failing in the "Left's" ability to mobilize black people but our conceptual failure to recognize a black radical tradition critical of, and illegible to, a Euro-American Left formed by the logic of Western civilization. When this tradition found its way into Left movements—in Africa, Latin America, even the United States—it brought its own unique vision, historical sensibility, and set of resistance strategies to the Communist movement; in doing so, it altered the Party. In other words, whereas most scholars set out to prove just how alien Communism was to black people, Robinson compelled me to ask what black people—in this case, black South Africans—brought to the Left to make it their own. The presumed objects of Communist machinations became subjects and agents in making their own history.

Taking my cue from Cedric Robinson, I published an essay in our graduate student-run journal, *Ufahamu*, on the Communist Party of South Africa (CPSA), arguing that a black radical tradition—rooted in earlier notions of African redemption, rural opposition to land dispossession, and expressions of working-class and petit bourgeois African nationalism—had produced a demand for self-determination before the Communist International was formed. Unable to recognize African radicalism, white South African Communists initially oriented their work toward the white working class. Imagine a Communist Party anywhere backing striking miners under the banner, "Workers of the World Unite and Fight for a WHITE SOUTH AFRICA!" When African trade unionists, as well as officials of the Communist International (Comintern) in Moscow, criticized Party leaders for their uncritical support of the all-white Rand Revolt in 1922 to the exclusion of the more numerous African miners' struggles, white South African Communists made the absurd argument that the "advanced" white proletariat must win the fight for socialism first in order to free the entire working class.⁵

Predictably, the Comintern directed the CPSA to redirect its work "toward the African masses." African and "Coloured" Communists, who now constituted the Party's majority, understood the directive to mean waging a mass struggle for African self-determination,

sovereignty, massive land reform, and majority rule. White Communists, on the other hand, interpreted the Comintern's resolution as a mandate to educate the "backwards" African working class to support a white-led proletarian revolution. The idea of a white-led proletarian revolution in South Africa was doomed from the start, as the 1922 Rand Revolt demonstrated, and the African, Coloured, and Indian comrades knew it. But since whites still held the reins of the CPSA, non-white Communists depended on the Comintern to lay down the law, as it were. Although I had concluded that the Comintern played a key role in enforcing the demand for African self-determination, the essay's central contribution, I think, was to turn the usual claim that the Communists had infiltrated the African nationalist movement on its head. Rather, the nationalists infiltrated the Communist Party, adopted a radical vision of self-determination that recognized South Africa as a settler colonial state, and demanded the return of land and black majority rule, expressed as an "independent native South African Republic with full equal rights for all races."

This article, despite its overly rigid formulations and archival limitations, planted the seeds for *Hammer and Hoe*. I extended my proposed thesis to include the U.S. South, hoping to produce a comparative study of black radicalism and the Communist Left in two global industrial cities—Johannesburg and Birmingham, Alabama. Without going into the messy details, let me just say that the project was always untenable since I had no prospect of getting into South Africa and therefore no access to the necessary archives. In 1985, the year my dissertation prospectus was approved, President P. W. Botha declared a state of emergency, making travel to South Africa all but impossible. And my participation in protests at the South African Consulate in Beverly Hills did not bode well for my visa application. I ended up dropping the South African component, switching to U.S. history, and focusing my research entirely on Alabama. The rest, as they say, is history.

Nothing—neither Nell Irvin Painter's magnificent *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson: His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (1979) nor *Black Marxism*—fully prepared me for what I encountered in Alabama. The testimonies and memories, the archives, the very landscape constituted living proof that a political culture distinct from the Euro-American Left and rooted in older Afro-Christian and black folk traditions dominated the Communist Party in Alabama. The overwhelming, startling evidence compelled me to leave a lot of my assumptions about Marxist-Leninist movement culture behind. Relying on police records, the local and national Communist press, leaflets and handbills, oral histories, photographs, even a marked-up Bible, I found

some dramatic episodes of armed sharecroppers fighting cops and landlords, interracial demonstrations in downtown Birmingham, and legal cases that transformed local injustices into international scandals. But I also found lots of small stories of how black Communists made themselves and their movement visible when their lives depended on invisibility: by leaving their mark in wet concrete; by placing leaflets in trees, releasing them on the ground for the wind to distribute, hiding them in the laundry baskets of domestic workers going into their white comrades' homes; by sending unsigned penny postcards to social workers and city relief agencies to demand more assistance and better treatment; by restoring a neighbor's electricity using jumper cables when he or she could not pay the bill; by playing the role of "Sambo" before a judge in order to escape a jail sentence.

I wasn't prepared for characters such as Lemon Johnson, a former member of the Communist-led Share Croppers Union. In December 1986, I visited Johnson at his home in rural Montgomery County, which I described in my journal as "a tiny, run-down shack with battered wooden walls, a rusted tin roof that had begun to cave in, and a porch stocked with three rickety chairs."⁶ He fed me a huge lunch of collard greens, beans, Wonder Bread, fried chicken, and a slice of cake. We ate outside and talked for a while; when it became unbearably cold, we moved inside. I sat on his bed as he slouched in a wooden chair next to me. A faded picture of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was tacked to the wall above his head. He told stories about the 1935 cotton pickers' strike, Stalin's pledge to send troops to Mobile to help black sharecroppers if things got out of hand, and the night a well-armed group of women set out to avenge their comrades who had been beaten or killed during the strike. When I asked Mr. Johnson how the union succeeded in winning some of their demands, without the slightest hesitation he reached into the drawer of his nightstand and pulled out a dog-eared copy of V. I. Lenin's *What Is to Be Done* and a box of shotgun shells, set both firmly on the bed next to me, and said, "Right thar, theory and practice. That's how we did it. Theory and practice."⁷

I spent nearly a year "in the field," scouring archives all over the country, trying to piece together the history of a semi-underground movement that deliberately left few traces. Alabama Communists succeeded so well, in fact, that several southern historians did not believe there was enough evidence to warrant a dissertation—let alone a book. (My dissertation ultimately weighed in at 698 pages.) Besides, it seemed that parts of the story had been told elsewhere. Ned Cobb eloquently recounts the story of the Share Croppers Union in Theodore Rosengarten's 1974 oral narrative *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw*, and Nell Irvin Painter's *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson*

captures the radical democratic vision of a grassroots black Communist leader in Birmingham.⁸ Painter and Rosengarten were able to draw out the psychic, social, and political costs of being a black radical in the Deep South. I had imagined the archetypal black Communist as heroic and intellectually astute, delivering fiery street-corner speeches and fighting cops as they drag evicted workers' furniture back into their homes. But this wasn't Hudson—not exactly. After I read Painter's book and interviewed him, Hudson reminded me of my grandfather from South Carolina, from his colloquial speech, his superstitions, and love of good gospel music to his constant refrain that he was probably right since so-and-so was dead and he was still living. This blew my mind and made me rethink what it meant, not just to be a Communist, but a movement person—a movement person who was poor, black, and intelligent, despite a lack of formal education. It profoundly shaped my view of the Communist and working-class political culture in the South. His story was the greatest reminder that people are constantly in motion. They always have the potential for transformation, and participation in social movements is the prime catalyst. We see Hudson change before our very eyes, from a quiet, unassuming child of a sharecropper without much to look forward to, to a confident leader, powerful speaker, and Marxist-Leninist to boot.

I'm indebted to Nell Painter, not only for her magnificent portrait of Hudson but for the care she took to read and critique early drafts of *Hammer and Hoe*. She, along with Mark D. Naison (author of *Communists in Harlem during the Depression*) and Theodore and Dale Rosengarten, read the entire manuscript and offered invaluable advice and suggestions. Dale's 1969 Radcliffe College thesis on the history of the Alabama Share Croppers Union paved the way for all subsequent research on the movement. Another scholar who followed in her footsteps and generously shared with me his findings and contacts was the venerable Shinobu Uesugi, a Japanese historian who spent over a decade documenting the history of agrarian radicalism in the Black Belt.⁹

Two scholars, in particular, helped me make sense of the Alabama Communist Party's distinctive political culture. First, by sheer coincidence, the late George Rawick became a mentor to me in the spring of 1987. He had accepted a visiting position at UCLA just as I returned from the field and began writing my dissertation. Illness rendered him virtually immobile, so I volunteered to drive him to campus. Three days a week I would guide him to the café in North Campus, secure his two cinnamon rolls and coffee, and sit with him for an hour or more. He schooled me in ways to interpret working-class movements, culture, and resistance, and introduced me to some

of his groundbreaking essays, such as “The Historical Roots of Black Liberation” (1968), “Notes on the American Working Class” (1968), and “Working Class Self-Activity,” (1969).¹⁰ By paying greater attention to Rawick’s concept of “self-activity,” I found that Alabama’s Communists opened up another world of politics since most of the people the Party fought for did not join insurgent organizations. They fought back as individuals or groups, often using strategies intended to cover their tracks. Rawick also insisted I read *Class and Culture in Cold War America: “A Rainbow at Midnight”* by an incredible young historian named George Lipsitz. First published in 1981, the book offered a provocative and convincing thesis that the postwar period was not the death of labor’s struggle but one of the most active, militant periods of working-class opposition in U.S. history.¹¹ Most importantly, he discovered in popular culture expressions of working-class desire and developed a whole new way to analyze the cultures of aggrieved populations. I was hooked. Just a year later, in 1988, he published *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition*, a brilliant biography of St. Louis organizer Ivory Perry that literally forced me to rewrite large sections of what by then had become *Hammer and Hoe*, the book manuscript. Lipsitz’s argument that Ivory Perry was formed by and operated within a “culture of opposition” gave me the framework I needed to understand the local political culture and to help me see the Alabama Communists and their supporters as organic intellectuals.¹² Once I did that, I could see the cultural and ideological bases of their own way of seeing alternatives to the status quo. I came to understand why the Bible was more important in challenging the dominant ideology than, say, Marx or Lenin.

Thanks to the many readers acknowledged in the text, and my indefatigable team at UNC Press—notably Iris Tillman Hill, then editor-in-chief and the project’s first champion, and my tireless and patient editor Lewis Bateman—I forged these stories into a work of which I’m still quite proud. Garnering critical praise from historians and across disciplines, *Hammer and Hoe* won a couple of noteworthy book prizes, was the subject of roundtable discussions, and has been widely taught and cited. (A passage from the book even turned up on the Law School Admission Test!) After twenty-five years, it is still in print. And while I’ve appreciated the professional recognition, I have been especially moved by the responses I’ve gotten from activists who read the book on their own or in study groups. Organizers from the Labor/Community Strategy Center (Los Angeles), Project South (Atlanta), Standing Together to Organize a Revolutionary Movement (STORM) (Bay Area), and the Miami Workers Center, to name a few, have all conveyed to me the valuable *political* lessons they took from

the book. For example, young activists who often felt that divisions of race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality were insurmountable, or assumed that identities determine political choices and alliances, learned that solidarity is a dynamic, often unpredictable process shaped inexorably by actual struggles in real time. Black working-class Alabamians did not join the Communist Party out of some economic calculation or because they were driven by narrow interest-group politics. They were not fighting for themselves; they were fighting for each other, and for a fairer, less oppressive world for all.

But the most illuminating lessons *I* took from the book came not from political activists but from a playwright. A little over ten years ago, *Hammer and Hoe* inspired critically acclaimed author Naomi Wallace to write *Things of Dry Hours*, a powerful three-person play set in 1930s Birmingham. Tice Hogan, an older, widowed, black Communist leader lives with his daughter Cali, a domestic worker, and they suddenly find themselves having to give refuge to a young white “comrade” wanted by the Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company’s (TCI) private police. Wallace had completely absorbed every nuance, every argument, every detail in the book, and grasped what it meant to build a radical, interracial, working-class movement in the heart of the Deep South. She understood that violence and even death came with the territory. And yet she deliberately avoided the kinds of violent confrontations and public events I always thought were most dramatic. Instead, she brilliantly set the entire play inside Tice Hogan’s tiny shotgun house, transforming it into a secret refuge hidden in plain sight. We don’t see the violence or the protests or the actual street organizing but we know it’s there. The virtually claustrophobic setting becomes a metaphor for the interior lives of southern working people—black and white, radical and reactionary. Wallace succeeded in taking three characters and reconstructing the world I found so elusive, the complex story of how people struggle to find life, love, meaning, and connection under the incredible circumstances of building a revolutionary movement in the Jim Crow South. *Things of Dry Hours* does not dramatize the “facts” but lays bare emotional truths, reveals what bubbles underneath the surface: in this case, love and desire. She revealed father-daughter love, in the context of building a new society in their heads; comradely love across the color line; sexual agency and terror.

As we now know, all predictions that the end of the Cold War spelled the death of Communist history proved premature. On the contrary, research and writing on the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) have proliferated since the publication of *Hammer and Hoe*.¹³ One reason for the growing interest has been the opening of the Russian

State Archive of Social and Political History (RGASPI)—a consequence of the end of the Cold War. The availability of the Soviet archives has opened up new windows onto both local and international histories of Communist Parties, especially from the mid- to late 1920s to the mid-1930s.¹⁴ For example, Glenda Gilmore's superb book, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950*, judiciously plumbs the Soviet archives to reveal how conversations in Moscow, New York, and South Africa influenced Communist strategy in the South during the 1930s.¹⁵ Randi Storch's *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35* creatively draws on the Soviet archives to paint a rich picture of daily work and political life among the cadre in the Windy City.¹⁶

For this new edition of *Hammer and Hoe*, I considered incorporating the Soviet archival material, but what I found would not have changed my argument. The new material would have allowed me to flesh out certain stories, say a bit more about debates in the Soviet Union over the interpretation of “self-determination,” and quote some of the fascinating letters from District 17 leaders such as Ted Wellman or Nat Ross. This would have made the book bigger while leaving the essential narrative unchanged. (I did make a few minor corrections where appropriate.) Besides, upon rereading *Hammer and Hoe* in preparation for writing this introduction, I was struck by how much of the book focuses on the social and political history of Alabama working people, state violence, political economy, and the impact of federal New Deal policy. Party work was determined less by Communist internal machinations than by the conditions on the ground.

Besides, the availability of new archives does not fully explain the *current* fascination with the history of the Communist Party. Over the past five or six years, I've gotten more requests to talk about *Hammer and Hoe* than about any other book I've published. New study groups have resurrected it, organizers are discussing it again, and I've been told that a copy showed up at the Occupy Wall Street People's Library in Zuccotti Park. Once again, the political context matters. Renewed interest in *Hammer and Hoe*, in particular, is the result of the ravages of neoliberalism and the global economic crisis, on the one hand, and the growth of the carceral state and the latest wave of police killings, on the other. Anticapitalism has become cool again, thanks to Occupy, the new hipsters and the share economy, the spectacular movement of Wal-Mart and fast-food workers across the country, and the recent publication of Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs. the Climate* (2014), which makes a compelling argument that in order to save the earth ravaged by corporate and state violence, we must end capitalism. At the same time, opposition to a racist criminal justice

system has generated some of the largest, most sustained protests in years. The killing, corralling, caging, warehousing, expelling, firing, deporting, and outright killing of black and brown people continue unabated—ramping up, in fact, as declarations of racism’s death grow louder and more confident. In our current moment, anticapitalism and struggles against state violence and incarceration tend to be separate movements. For Communists and their allies—especially in the Deep South—they were inextricably bound together. The characters in *Hammer and Hoe* devoted as much of their energy to defending black people swept into a racist criminal justice system, investigating and challenging lynching, and protesting police murders of unarmed black people, as to fighting evictions, demanding relief for the unemployed, and organizing trade unions.

Let’s begin with anticapitalism: No matter what we might think of the Soviet Union in hindsight, or the Communist or various socialist parties, in the 1930s Social Democracy and forms of socialism were considered legitimate alternatives to capitalism. Capitalism was not yet victorious, especially since radical workers’ and farmers’ movements of the late nineteenth century were still part of a living national memory. Today labor unions are portrayed as corrupt, bloated, a drain on the economy, even as the American worker is being promoted as the most productive in the world—not because of unions but in spite of them! In our neoliberal age, economic debates focus not on alternatives to capitalism but on what *kind* of capitalism—capitalism with a safety net for the poor or one driven by extreme free-market liberalization? A capitalism in which the state’s role is to bail out big banks and financial institutions, or one where the state imposes (or rather restores) greater regulation in order to avoid economic crises? In both of these scenarios, a weakened labor movement is a given. The once-powerful unions are doing little more than fighting to restore basic collective bargaining rights and deciding how much they are going to give back. Union leaders are struggling just to participate in crafting austerity measures. Whereas in the New Deal era, the state’s efforts to save capitalism centered on John Maynard Keynes’s ideas, leading to massive expenditures in infrastructure, job creation, social safety nets like social security and unemployment insurance (paid by workers themselves, let’s not forget), and certain protections for the right of unions to organize. All of these measures were made possible by a strong labor movement and unemployed movement. There was a level of militant organization that we did not see in our post-2008 collapse, in spite of Occupy Wall Street. While Occupy was massive, international, and built on preexisting social justice movements, it lacked the kind of institutional power base and political clout that organized labor had in

the 1930s.

Hammer and Hoe not only reminds us that black and some poor white folks dreamed of socialist futures, but that the New Deal was a far cry from their vision of a just economy. It is hard to understand this in an era when progressives are struggling just to restore positive features of the New Deal welfare state. But as the book reveals, New Deal policies in Alabama were neither democratic nor inclusive. For most black rural and urban working people, the New Deal led to greater inequalities and outright dispossession. The New Deal's agricultural programs, for example, benefited landowners and landlords by federally subsidizing crop reductions. In theory, the money was supposed to be fairly distributed to tenant farmers and sharecroppers, but that never happened. Instead, the landlords kept the money, evicted the tenant farmers and sharecroppers from their land, and used the federal payments to hire them back as cheap wage laborers while investing in mechanical cotton pickers to eventually replace them. The Party opposed evictions, demanded basic landlord-tenant rights and contracts, and fought for a decent wage for rural laborers. But the New Deal did not protect or recognize the rights of rural workers as labor under the National Industrial Recovery Act, Wagner Act, and related legislation.

Once the Communists shifted from adversary to ally of the New Deal during the Popular Front, Leftists such as Hosea Hudson and Henry O. Mayfield were swallowed up by the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The Party practically ceased to function as an independent, autonomous organization. My suggestion that the Popular Front led to the Party's demise in Alabama is still perhaps the book's most controversial argument. The Popular Front era, after all, was considered the Party's heyday, when liberals and anti-Fascists were willing to build alliances, and the CPUSA's leaders declared "Communism 20th Century Americanism." To be fair, black Communists were effective in their role as the left wing of the labor movement. They led the union's voter registration campaigns and fought to abolish the poll tax. However, the failure of the CIO's Operation Dixie, anticommunism within the AFL-CIO, not to mention the anticommunism of the NAACP, weakened or destroyed the Communist-led unions, leaving an indelible mark on the next wave of civil rights activists and possibly arresting what may have been a broader economic and social justice agenda.

But the Communists hardly disappeared. For most African Americans, as well as black people all over the world, the Party was best known for its defense of the Scottsboro Nine and the International Labor Defense's (ILD) unremitting challenge to a racist criminal justice

system. This remains their legacy. In 2002, when Antron McCray, Kevin Richardson, Raymond Santana, Yusef Salaam, and Kharey Wise—known collectively as the Central Park Five—were finally exonerated for the 1989 rape and beating of Trisha Meili, I was invited on *Democracy Now!* and other talk shows to compare their case with Scottsboro. Some of the comparisons were strikingly obvious: the press demonized the defendants, calling the Scottsboro boys “brutes,” “animals,” and “savages,” just as the Central Park Five became known as a “wolfpack.” The press demonized the mothers, as well, blaming single parenting and dysfunctional families for their behavior (all of the defendants were between fourteen and fifteen years old). They were falsely convicted thanks to forced confessions, media hysteria, an overzealous prosecutor, and a longstanding racist discourse that presumes all black and brown men to be violent sexual predators.¹⁷

There was one fundamental difference, however: the presence of the Left. The Communists and the ILD transformed a local—and, I might add, common—injustice into an international cause célèbre by building a mass movement to free the Scottsboro Nine. Two weeks after the arrest, the Communists got thirteen thousand people to take to the streets of Cleveland to protest the “Scottsboro Frame-up.” The very next day, they led a demonstration in New York City twenty thousand strong. They formed Scottsboro defense committees all over the country, whose members flooded the Alabama governor’s office with telegrams, letters, and postcards demanding freedom for the Scottsboro Boys. They inspired mass meetings in Paris, Moscow, Johannesburg, London, and Tokyo, accusing the state of Alabama of planning a “legal lynching.” The Communists argued that the defendants were not just innocent based on lack of evidence, but that they were victims of a racist and classist system. Most strikingly, they promoted representations of the defendants and the alleged victims that countered the racial and gendered stereotypes used by the state and white supremacists (e.g., that all black men are violent, dangerous rapists and all white women are pure, virtuous victims). Instead, they succeeded in doing something extraordinary: they reversed the poles of criminalization, turning young black men—and young working-class white women—into victims and the state into the criminal. It opened a path for thinking about incarcerated black people as “class-war prisoners.”

Scottsboro was not the only case. Alabama Communists and the ILD were overwhelmed with local incidents of lynchings, police shootings, false arrests, even the rape of black women. Names that appear in these pages—such as Tom Robertson, Babe Dawes, Thomas Jasper, Ralph Gray, Willie Peterson, Dan Pippen Jr., Elmore (Honey) Clarke,

A. T. Harden, and Dennis Cross—may not possess the historical weight of Ozie Powell, Clarence Norris, Haywood Patterson, or any of the other Scottsboro defendants, but they are the historical antecedents of Trayvon Martin, Renisha McBride, Jonathan Ferrell, Ramarley Graham, Jordan Davis, Ernest Hoskins Jr., Tanisha Anderson, Roshad McIntosh, Aura Rain Rosser, Darrien Hunt, Michael Brown, Kajieme Powell, Vonderitt D. Myers Jr., John Crawford III, Eric Garner, Cary Ball Jr., Akai Gurley, Tamir Rice . . .

But let's be clear: it is not the body count that matters. It is the history of a vibrant, grassroots, radical movement that matters. It is resistance to injustice and an ongoing struggle to create a new world that matters. The young organizers in Ferguson and St. Louis, Missouri, from Hands Up United, Lost Voices, Organization for Black Struggle, Don't Shoot Coalition, and Millennial Activists United, are the bearers of the Alabama Communist Party's legacy. So are Florida's Dream Defenders. So are the young Chicago activists who founded We Charge Genocide and the Black Youth Project 100. So is the "Moral Mondays" movement, the multiracial coalition based in North Carolina and Georgia whose members return to jail in the cause of racial, class, and gender justice. So are those visionary activists in post-Katrina New Orleans, a key battleground in neoliberalism's unrelenting war on working people, where black organizers lead multiracial coalitions to resist the privatization of schools, hospitals, public transit, public housing, and dismantling of public sector unions. So are the Los Angeles-based youth who make up the Community Rights Campaign, and the hundreds of organizations across the country challenging everyday state violence, occupation, exploitation, and wage theft. They remind us that the problems that beset us cannot be fixed with reforms or legislation or a better president. They understand that we are still grappling with the consequences of settler colonialism, racial capitalism, and patriarchy.

I did not propose a twenty-fifth anniversary edition of *Hammer and Hoe* simply to mark time, to sell books, or to frame how a new "invisible army" might read and process this extraordinary story. I think the most important lessons are not necessarily the ones I recognize or acknowledge, but the lessons readers take from the book upon reflecting on their own experiences and dreams of the world they are trying to build. That said, I do think that the book proves—again—that antiracism and class solidarity are not trade-offs or mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive. The same holds true for all forms of oppression—sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, etc. Second, the Communists placed what appeared to be local and isolated struggles against "mean" bosses and landlords in a global context, one that exposed the structural dimensions of racial

capitalism as a system and offered a different path forward. Third, the movement did, in some ways, lay the groundwork for the next generation of activists who truly transformed the face of the South and the United States as a whole. Finally, this work reveals something about how people think and how struggle changes their ideas about what is possible, why they are poor and oppressed, and what alternatives to Jim Crow capitalism might look like. I've come to realize that this task might have been the most important of all.

Notes

1. It never occurred to me until now, but it is perhaps not a coincidence that one of my first published essays examined the transition to socialism in the People's Republic of the Congo. See Robin D. G. Kelley, "Problems of Socialist Transformation in Africa: The Congolese Experience," *Ufahamu* 13, nos. 2 and 3 (1984): 259–282.
2. Robin D. G. Kelley, "The Role of the International Sports Boycott in the Anti-Apartheid Movement," *Ufahamu* 13, nos. 2 and 3 (1984): 26–39.
3. Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington, D. C.: Howard University Press, 1981, orig. 1972); Chinweizu, *The West and the Rest of Us: White Predators, Black Enslavers, and the African Elite* (New York: Random House, 1975); Angela Davis, *Women, Race and Class* (New York: Random House, 1981); Vincent Harding, *There is a River: The Black Struggle for Freedom in America* (New York: Random House, 1983); Manning Marable, *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness and Revolution* (Dayton, Ohio: Black Praxis Press, 1981) and *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End Press, 1982); Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982); Barbara Smith's many articles, some of which were later collected in *The Truth that Never Hurts: Writings on Race, Gender and Freedom* (Piscataway, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1998); and the essential edited collections, Barbara Smith, Gloria T. Hull, and Patricia Bell Scott, eds., *All the Women Are White, All the Blacks Are Men, But Some of Us Are Brave: Black Women's Studies* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1982); Barbara Smith, ed., *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (New York: Kitchen Table: Women of Color Press, 1983); Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978) and *The Question of Palestine* (New York: Vintage, 1980); among Samir Amin's many books, most influential at the time was *Unequal Development: An Essay on the Social Formations of Peripheral Capitalism* (New York:

Monthly Review Press, 1976).

4. Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000, orig. 1983).

5. Robin D. G. Kelley, "The Third International and the Struggle for National Liberation in South Africa, 1921–1928," *Ufahamu* 15, nos. 2 and 3 (1986): 99–120.

6. Robin D. G. Kelley, unpublished journal, December 1986, in author's possession.

7. Lemon Johnson, interview with author, December 20, 1986.

8. Theodore Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers: The Life of Nate Shaw* (New York: Knopf, 1974); Nell Irvin Painter, *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1979). Portions of these works were published in *Radical America*: Nell Painter and Hosea Hudson, "Hosea Hudson: A Negro Communist in the Deep South," *Radical America* 11 (July-August 1977): 7–23; Theodore Rosengarten and Dale Rosen, "Shoot-out at Reeltown: The Narrative of Jess Hull, Alabama Tenant Farmer," *Radical America* 6 (November-December 1972): 65–84. See also Theodore Rosengarten, "Reminiscences of Theodore Rosengarten," (lecture, Oral History Project, Columbia University, New York, 1976). Also, Hosea Hudson produced his own book, *Black Worker in the Deep South* (New York: International Publishers, 1972).

9. Shinobu Uesugi, *Kominken Undo heno Michi: Amerika Nanbu Noson niokeru Kokujin no Tataikai* [The way to the civil rights movement: The struggle of African Americans in the American South] (Tokyo: Iwanami Shoten, 1998).

10. George Rawick, "The Historical Roots of Black Liberation," *Radical America* 2 (July-August 1968): 1–13; "Working Class Self-Activity," *Radical America* 3 (March-April 1969): 23–31; "Notes on the American Working Class," *Speak Out* (June-July 1968). These and other essays have been reprinted in an excellent anthology of Rawick's writings: David Roediger, ed, *Listening to Revolt: The Selected Writings of George Rawick* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr Publishers, 2010).

11. George Lipsitz, *Class and Culture in Cold War America: "A Rainbow at Midnight"* (New York: Praeger, 1981). A revised and expanded version of the book was published thirteen years later as *A Rainbow at Midnight: Labor and Culture in the 1940s* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994).

12. George Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle: Ivory Perry and the Culture of Opposition* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1988).

13. Notable examples include Minkah Makalani, *In the Cause of Freedom: Radical Black Internationalism from Harlem to London, 1917–1939* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2011); Dayo F. Gore, *Radicalism at the Crossroads: African American Women Activists in the Cold War* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Erik S. McDuffie, *Sojourning for Freedom: Black Women, American Communism, and the Making of Black Left Feminism* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2011); Cheryl Higashida, *Black Internationalist Feminism: Women Writers of the Black Left, 1945–1995* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2011); William J. Maxwell, *New Negro, Old Left: African American Writing and Communism between the Wars* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999); Mark Solomon, *The Cry Was Unity: Communists and African Americans, 1917–1936* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1998); T. Michael Holmes, *The Specter of Communism in Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994); Winston James, *Holding Aloft the Banner of Ethiopia: Caribbean Radicalism in Early Twentieth-Century America* (London: Verso, 1998); Kate Weigand, *Red Feminism: American Communism and the Making of Women's Liberation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000); Robert Korstad, *Civil Rights Unionism: Tobacco Workers and the Struggle for Democracy in the Mid-Twentieth-Century South* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003); Jonathan Holloway, *Confronting the Veil: Abram Harris Jr., E. Franklin Frazier, and Ralph Bunche, 1919–1941* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Carol Boyce Davies, *Left of Karl Marx: The Political Life of Black Communist Claudia Jones* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2008); Susan D. Pennybacker, *From Scottsboro to Munich: Race and Political Culture in 1930s Britain* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009); Erik S. Gellman, *Death Blow to Jim Crow: The National Negro Congress and the Rise of Militant Civil Rights* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012); Michael C. Dawson, *Blacks In and Out of the Left* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Brian Dolinar, *The Black Cultural Front: Black Writers and Artists of the Depression Generation* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012); Mary Helen Washington, *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Michael Honey, *Southern Labor and Black Civil Rights: Organizing Memphis Workers* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1993); Bill Mullen, *Popular Fronts: Chicago and African-American Cultural Politics, 1935–46* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999); William J. Billingsley, *Communists on Campus: Race, Politics, and the Public University in Sixties North Carolina* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1999); Gregory S. Taylor, *The History of the North Carolina Communist Party* (Columbia: University of South Carolina

Press, 2009); Richard Iton, *Solidarity Blues: Race, Culture, and the American Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000); Karen Ferguson, *Black Politics in New Deal Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Vernon L. Pedersen, *The Communist Party in Maryland, 1919–57* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2000); Walter Howard, *We Shall Be Free!: Black Communist Protests in Seven Voices* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2013); Josephine Fowler, *Japanese and Chinese Immigrant Activists: Organizing in American and International Communist Movements, 1919–1933* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2007); Howard Eugene Johnson, with Mark D. Naison, *A Dancer in the Revolution: Stretch Johnson, Harlem Communist at the Cotton Club* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2014); and numerous work by Gerald Horne, most recently, *Fighting in Paradise: Labor Unions, Racism, and Communists in the Making of Modern Hawaii* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2011) and *Black Revolutionary: William Patterson and the Globalization of the African American Freedom Struggle* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2013); Jeff Woods, *Black Struggle, Red Scare: Segregation and Anti-Communism in the South, 1948–1968* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana University Press, 2003); and several works by Alan Wald, most recently *Exiles from a Future Time: The Forging of the Mid-Twentieth-Century Literary Left* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002) and *American Night: The Literary Left in the Era of the Cold War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012).

14. Randi Storch, “Moscow’s Archives and the New History of the Communist Party of the United States,” *Perspectives on History* (October 2000), <http://www.historians.org/publications-and-directories/perspectives-on-history/october-2000/moscows-archives-and-the-new-history-of-the-communist-party-of-the-united-states> (accessed December 14, 2014).

15. Glenda Elizabeth Gilmore, *Defying Dixie: The Radical Roots of Civil Rights, 1919–1950* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2008).

16. Randi Storch, *Red Chicago: American Communism at Its Grassroots, 1928–35* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2008).

17. See Natalie Byfield, *Savage Portrayals: Race, Media, and the Central Park Jogger Story* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

Preface

Ain't no foreign country in the world foreign as Alabama to a New Yorker. They know all about England, maybe, France, never met one who knew 'Bama.'

—*Anonymous black Communist*, 1945

After spending several years hobnobbing with European, Asian, and Soviet dignitaries of the Third International, *Daily Worker* correspondent Joseph North made a most unforgettable journey to, of all places, Chambers County, Alabama. Traveling surreptitiously with a black Birmingham Communist as his escort, North reached his destination—the tumbledown shack of a “sharecropper comrade”—in the wee hours of the night. The dark figure who greeted the two men “had read the *Worker* for years; solid and reliable, he was respected by his folk here, who regarded him as a ‘man with answers.’ The sharecropper was an elder in the Zion [A.] M.E. Church, who ‘trusts God but keeps his powder dry’; reads his Bible every night, can quote from the Book of Daniel and the Book of Job . . . and he’s been studying the Stalin book on the nation question.”¹

Although North’s visit took place in 1945, on the eve of the Alabama Party’s collapse, the “sharecropper comrade” he describes above epitomized the complex, seemingly contradictory radical legacy the Party left behind. Built from scratch by working people without a Euro-American left-wing tradition, the Alabama Communist Party was enveloped by the cultures and ideas of its constituency. Composed largely of poor blacks, most of whom were semiliterate and devoutly religious, the Alabama cadre also drew a small circle of white folks—whose ranks swelled or diminished over time—ranging from ex-Klansmen to former Wobblies, unemployed male industrial workers to iconoclastic youth, restless housewives to renegade liberals.

These unlikely radicals, their milieu, and the movement they created make up the central subjects of this book. Heeding Victoria de Grazia’s appeal to historians of the American Left for “a social history of politics,” I have tried to construct a narrative that examines Communist political opposition through the lenses of social and cultural history, paying particular attention to the worlds from which these radicals came, the worlds in which they lived, and the imaginary worlds they sought to build. I pluralize “worlds” to emphasize the

myriad individual and collective differences within the Alabama Communist movement. Those assembled under the red banner did not all share the same vision of radical opposition, nor were they motivated by the same circumstances. Neither the “Jimmy (or Jane) Higginses” of historian Aileen Kraditor's mind nor the doughty, selfless caricatures of left-wing fiction, these women and men came from the farms, factories, mines, kitchens, and city streets, not as intellectual blank sheets but loaded down with cultural and ideological baggage molded by their race, class, gender, work, community, region, history, upbringing, and collective memory. Their ideas and concerns shaped the Party's political practice and social life at the most local level. And, in turn, Alabama radicals were themselves shaped by local CP leaders' efforts to change the way “ordinary” people thought about politics, history, and society. What emerged was a malleable movement rooted in a variety of different pasts, reflecting a variety of different voices, and incorporating countless contradictory tendencies. The movement's very existence validates literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin's observation that a culture is not static but open, “capable of death and renewal, transcending itself, that is exceeding its own boundaries.”²

And Alabama Communists had titanic boundaries to exceed. More than in the Northeast and Midwest, the regional incubators of American Communism, race pervaded virtually every aspect of Southern society. The relations between industrial labor and capital, and landlords and tenants, were clouded by divisions based on skin color. On the surface, at least, it seemed that there existed two separate racial communities in the segregated South that only intersected in the world of work or at the marketplace. Sharp class distinctions endured within both black and white communities, but racism tended to veil, and at times arrest, intraracial class conflict as well as interracial working-class unity. Alabama Party leaders could not escape the prevalence of race, despite their unambiguous emphasis on class-based politics. Indeed, during its first five years in Alabama, the CP inevitably evolved into a “race” organization, a working-class alternative to the NAACP. As Nell Painter observed, the rank-and-file folk “made the Party their own. In Alabama in the 1930's, the CP was a southern, working-class black organization.”³

The homegrown radicalism that had germinated in poor black communities and among tiny circles of white rebels remained deep underground. Alabama Communists did not have much choice. Their challenge to racism and to the status quo prompted a wave of repression one might think inconceivable in a democratic country. The extent and character of anti-radical repression in the South constitute a crucial part of our story. When we ponder Werner Sombart's

question, “Why is there no socialism in the United States?” in light of the South, violence and lawlessness loom large. The fact is, the CP and its auxiliaries in Alabama *did* have a considerable following, some of whom devoured Marxist literature and dreamed of a socialist world. But to be a Communist, an ILD member, or an SCU militant was to face the possibility of imprisonment, beatings, kidnapping, and even death. And yet the Party survived, and at times thrived, in this thoroughly racist, racially divided, and repressive social world.

Indeed, most scholars have underestimated the Southern Left and have underrated the role violence played in quashing radical movements. Religious fundamentalism, white racism, black ignorance or indifference, the Communists’ presumed insensitivity to Southern culture, their advocacy of black self-determination during the early 1930s, and an overall lack of class consciousness are all oft-cited explanations for the Party’s “failure” to attract Southern workers.⁴ The experiences of Alabama Communists, however, suggest that racial divisions were far more fluid and Southern working-class consciousness far more complex than most historians have realized. The African-Americans who made up the Alabama radical movement experienced and opposed race *and* class oppression as a totality. The Party and its various auxiliaries served as vehicles for black working-class opposition on a variety of different levels ranging from antiracist activities to intraracial class conflict. Furthermore, the CP attracted some openly bigoted whites despite its militant antiracist slogans. The Party also drew women whose efforts to overcome gender-defined limitations proved more decisive to their radicalization than did either race or class issues.

I suppose I should say something about the now infamous debate over the CPUSA’s relationship to the Communist International. Although it had been brewing since the “new social historians,” who sought to rewrite CP history from the “bottom up,” challenged earlier studies by Theodore Draper and others depicting American Communists as veritable puppets of Kremlin intrigue, the controversy reached a climax in 1985 when battle lines were drawn between pro- and anti-Draper forces and a deluge of letters and articles engulfed the *New York Review of Books*.⁵ As a twenty-three-year-old graduate student about to embark on what would have been a multivolume dissertation on the Communist Party in South Africa and the American South, I was eager to enter the fray. But as I was an unknown entity in the academic community with only a book review to my credit, no respectable journal or newspaper would have taken me seriously. Nevertheless, my youth and anonymity turned out to be a blessing in disguise, for after having spent the next four years living and breathing Alabama CP history, the whole debate seems, in retrospect,

rather superfluous, even silly.

Of course the Alabama cadre dutifully followed national and international leadership, just as Birmingham NAACP leaders jumped at every directive handed down from their executive secretary Walter White. Local Communists cried out for direction, especially after wrestling with vague theoretical treatises on capital's crisis or on the growing specter of fascism. Though they knowingly bucked national leadership decisions on a few occasions, local cadre tried their best to apply the then current political line to the tasks at hand. But because neither Joe Stalin, Earl Browder, nor William Z. Foster spoke directly to them or to their daily problems, Alabama Communists developed strategies and tactics in response to local circumstances that, in most cases, had nothing to do with international crises. Besides, if Alabamians had waited patiently for orders from Moscow, they might still be waiting today. Not only were lines of communication between New York and Birmingham hazy throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but Birmingham Communists had enough difficulty maintaining contact with comrades as close as Tallapoosa County.

The complex and decentralized structure of Party organization in Alabama requires a nuanced, somewhat detailed narrative sensitive to local history. *Hammer and Hoe* examines Party activity in the neighborhoods, industrial suburbs, company towns of the greater Birmingham-Bessemer area, the black belt and its urban centers of Montgomery and Selma, and the eastern piedmont counties. When possible, I have tried to chronicle CP work in Mobile as well as in several northern Alabama counties, but Communists there did not have much of a public presence and left very few records. The organization of this book, therefore, reflects the Party's multiissue, multicomunity focus. Following a brief portrait of Birmingham from its inception to the Great Depression, Part I reconstructs the period from 1930 to 1935 in five thematic chapters. Chapter 1 documents the Party's origins and early organizing efforts among Birmingham's jobless from 1930 to 1933. Turning to the countryside, chapter 2 chronicles the Share Croppers' Union's first five years and offers some insights into the context and character of rural radicalism. The Party's industrial organizing efforts and the intensification of antiradical repression during the 1934 strike wave are the focus of chapter 3. The fourth chapter looks at the CP-led International Labor Defense's challenge to black middle-class leadership and examines the racial, class, and sexual dimensions of the ILD's involvement in alleged rape cases. The final chapter in Part I steps back from the narrative for a moment and explores the social, ideological, and cultural foundations of radicalism among black Communists, the ways in which Marxist pedagogy influenced their outlook, and the Party's role in shaping

class conflict within the black community.

Part II, which deals with the Popular Front (1935–39), adopts a similar thematic format. Chapter 6 (1935–37) traces local leaders' response to and interpretation of the new policy, discusses Communist efforts to build alliances with Southern liberals, and examines the effect of Popular Front politics on the Party's rank-and-file. Chapters 7 through 9 analyze the Communists' role in building both the Congress of Industrial Organizations and the Workers' Alliance and document the collapse of the Share Croppers' Union. These three chapters, along with chapter 6, explain the decline in black Party membership during the Popular Front. The Birmingham CP's retreat from working-class militancy and entrance into the world of Southern liberalism—the period from 1937 to 1939—are the subjects of chapter 10. Part III, which covers the historical moment from the Nazi-Soviet Pact to U.S. entry into World War II, consists of a single chapter. Here we find the Party on the road to revitalization, not as an autonomous organization but as part of a much broader, radical interracial youth movement. Finally, the Epilogue sweeps through the war and postwar periods, reconstructing the Party's ultimate demise and ruminating on the legacy it left behind.

In closing, I should add that some of the stories herein have been told before. Two decades ago an old black farmer named Ned Cobb shared his recollections of the Communist-led Share Croppers' Union with Theodore and Dale Rosengarten. The result was the moving narrative *All God's Dangers* (1974). Another participant-griot, Hosea Hudson, preserved the struggles of Birmingham Communists in his heavily edited book, *Black Worker in the Deep South* (1972). A few years later, the richness and complexity of Hudson's life and the lives of his comrades were brilliantly captured by Nell Irvin Painter in *The Narrative of Hosea Hudson, His Life as a Negro Communist in the South* (1979). Two magnificent oral memoirs are a hell of an act to follow. No university-trained historian can match the beauty and grace of Cobb's and Hudson's storytelling, nor can she or he convey, with all the required subtleties, the feelings, the fears, the pride, the confusion—the mosaic of emotions that went with being black and radical in the depression South. In order to truly appreciate the men and women who made the movement, I urge all to read Rosengarten's and Painter's wonderful narratives as companion volumes to this book.

The saga of the Alabama Communist Party is but a chapter in a larger work waiting to be written. Communists were all over the South, from Chattanooga, Tennessee, to Oxford, Mississippi, influencing communities and individuals in ways we have yet to understand, making history we have yet to know. Though they never

seized state power or led a successful socialist revolution below the Mason-Dixon line, Communists deserve a place in Southern history. As former Alabama Party leader Robert Fowler Hall argued a few years ago, “If the courage of white liberals, though ineffective, is worth a book, the courage of Southern Communists during those three decades justifies some footnotes.”⁶ At the very least, some books.

Atlanta and Chapel Hill

July 1989

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Scholars who claim collegiality has died know little of the world I entered when I began this project. Even when I was a graduate student merely testing the muddy waters of Communist historiography, a number of eminent historians freely offered time, information, and encouragement—a rare thing, especially for black graduate students who must enter the academy through long, dark pipelines or sneak in through windows of opportunity. Nell Irvin Painter and Mark Naison—both of whom saw this book grow from an inchoate idea to an unwieldy dissertation to a publishable manuscript—carefully and patiently read several drafts of the work at various stages. Their selfless assistance, scholarship, and enthusiasm for this project can never be paid back in full. The same must be said of Elsa Barkley Brown, Paul and MariJo Buhle, Leon Fink, Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, Lois Rita Helmbold, Michael Honey, Tera Hunter, Walter Jackson, Robert Korstad, Cliff Kuhn, Susan Levine, Jeff Norrell, Linda Reed, Julius Scott, and Stephanie Shaw. Jacquelyn and Elsa, each in her own special way, schooled me in feminist theory and helped me understand the meaning of “multiple consciousness.” I have Paul to thank for punctuating my writing blues with long, wonderful, witty missives; for introducing me to some Russian dude named Mikhail Bakhtin; and for re-introducing me to C. L. R. James.

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I have reserved this last paragraph for my best friend and comrade, Diedra Harris-Kelley. Typical spousal clichés are inappropriate for describing her role in the production of this book. She certainly did not make the research and writing any easier, nor did she allow *Hammer and Hoe* to interfere with my domestic duties. But she did break the monotony of an historian's life by turning each day into an adventure. She endured constant intrusions with remarkable patience, read drafts of the work, uprooted inconsistencies, analyzed my dreams, bragged to our families about how “our book” is coming along, and survived my famous vegetarian neck-bone soup when photocopying costs drained our finances. Being the enthusiast she is, behind closed doors she cussed out every single individual who dared criticize me or my work, and yet she remained a relentless critic in her own right. Diedra's most important contribution to *Hammer and Hoe* graces the dust jacket. A great artist by trade and spirit, her powerful portrait of Alabama Communists captures the essence of Southern radicalism in ways that mere words could never convey.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations and acronyms are used in the text. For abbreviations used in the notes, see pages 233–34.

AAA	Agricultural Adjustment Act
AFL	American Federation of Labor
AFU	Alabama Farmers' Union
ANLC	American Negro Labor Congress
APEA	Alabama People's Education Association
ASFL	Alabama State Federation of Labor
AWDC	Alabama Women's Democratic Club
CCC	Civilian Conservation Corps
CFWU	Croppers' and Farm Workers' Union
CIC	Commission on Interracial Cooperation
CIO	Congress of Industrial Organizations
CP, CPUSA	Communist Party of the United States of America
CWA	Civil Works Administration
CYS	Council of Young Southerners
ERP	Employee Representation Plan
ERWO	Etowah Rubber Workers Organization
FBI	Federal Bureau of Investigation
FEPC	

	Fair Employment Practices Committee
FERA	Federal Emergency Relief Act
FLCFWU	Farm Laborers and Cotton Field Workers Union
FSA	Farm Security Administration
HUAC	House Un-American Activities Committee
ILA	International Longshoremen's Association
ILD	International Labor Defense
ISU	International Seamen's Union
IWW	Industrial Workers of the World
KKK	Ku Klux Klan
LSNR	League of Struggle for Negro Rights
LYS	League of Young Southerners
Mine Mill	International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers
NAACP	National Association for the Advancement of Colored People
NCDPP	National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners
NCPR	National Committee for People's Rights
NEC	National Emergency Council
NFU	National Farmers' Union
NIRA	National Industrial Recovery Act
NLRB	National Labor Relations Board
NMU	National Miners Union
NNC	National Negro Congress
NRA	

	National Recovery Administration
NSL	
	National Students League
RPC	
	Revolutionary Policy Committee
RWL	
	Relief Workers' League
SCHW	
	Southern Conference for Human Welfare
SCPR	
	Southern Committee for People's Rights
SCU	
	Share Croppers' Union
SNCC	
	Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee
SNYC, Youth Congress	
	Southern Negro Youth Congress
SP, SPA	
	Socialist Party of America
SPC	
	Southern Policy Committee
STFU	
	Southern Tenant Farmers' Union
SWOC	
	Steel Workers Organizing Committee
TCI	
	Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company
TUUL	
	Trade Union Unity League
UCAPAWA	
	United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America
UMW	
	United Mine Workers of Alabama
UMWA	
	United Mine Workers of America
UNIA	
	Universal Negro Improvement Association
URWA	
	United Rubber Workers of America
WPA	
	Works Progress Administration
YCL	
	Young Communist League

HAMMER AND HOE

Prologue

Radical Genesis: Birmingham, 1870–1930

It is an industrial monster sprung up in the midst of a slow-moving pastoral. It does not belong—and yet it is one of the many proofs that Alabama is an amazing country, heterogeneous, grotesque, full of incredible contrasts. Birmingham is a new city in an old land.

—Carl Carmer

Perhaps more than any other city, Birmingham comes closest to embodying the mythic New South creed. Its resident and absentee mine and mill owners turned a cornfield and a swamp into a multiracial, bustling, smoky bastion of industrial capitalism where profits ruled and the feudal values of the Old South echoed faintly in the background. Their wealth depended on a huge, disciplined, docile labor force, but unlike machines, working people and their advocates fought to alter conditions they considered unjust or intolerable. Thus, as a competing center of heavy industry, Birmingham was to the Deep South what Cripple Creek, Colorado, or Coeur d'Alene, Idaho, was to the West—a cauldron of class conflict. But as Carl Carmer so eloquently explains above, the matrix of old and new makes Birmingham an unparalleled industrial center. The mine and mill owners hoped to mold an industrial proletariat in a city founded less than a generation after the abolition of chattel slavery and “peopled . . . with two races afraid of each other.”¹

From the discovery and exploitation of large mineral deposits in central Alabama emerged the Birmingham industrial complex—a region often called the “Pittsburgh of the South.” Before 1879, the Pratt Coal and Coke Company mined and exported the rich deposits of iron ore, coal, and limestone to Northern industries. When TCI took over the holdings of the Pratt Coal and Coke Company in 1886, which five years earlier had been purchased by industrialist Enoch Ensley, TCI became the most prodigious iron and steel manufacturer in the South. TCI swallowed up a large portion of the local iron and steel industry, and most remaining holdouts merged into three competing companies: the Sloss-Sheffield Steel and Iron Company, the Woodward Iron Company, and the Republic Iron and Steel Company.²

The juxtaposition of limestone, coking coal, dolomite, and red

hematite ore substantially reduced production costs, but it was not enough to make Birmingham's coal and iron industry competitive on the national market. Unlike the alluvial ore found in the Great Lakes region, Birmingham's deposits were buried deep below mountainous slopes, and the region's insufficient water supply, increased transportation costs, and the lower metallic content of its ore rendered capital investments comparatively higher. Yet, cheap black and white labor from the Alabama countryside compensated for the capital-intensive nature of mining, making the Birmingham district one of the least costly industrial centers in the country.³

Although Birmingham's profits rarely measured up to expectations and fortunes were earned and lost in an economy that resembled a slot machine, the district nevertheless generated tremendous wealth for a tiny minority. In 1910, individuals whose net worth was over \$35,000 comprised merely 1 percent of the population, whereas 80 percent earned below \$500 per annum. In addition to having the means for an elegant lifestyle, this small group of industrialists wielded enormous economic and political power. Interlocking directorships and control over various real estate, banking, and mining ventures were held by such individuals as Henry T. DeBardeleben, Robert I. Ingalls, Erskine Ramsay, Robert Jemison, Jr., Walter Henley, and others. Although few held political office, these men used financial strength to exercise considerable power over local government. Birmingham's nouveau riche industrialists spent lavishly and developed a strong consciousness of class and a sense of social cohesion. They built plush mansions in areas such as Shades Valley and Mountain Brooks Estates, distant from the bellowing smoke of the steel mills. In a spectacular display of wealth, one Birmingham capitalist built a home replicating a Roman temple. Alongside numerous bronze and plaster statues sat "two dog houses, built like miniature Parthenons, with classic porticoes and tiny pillars."⁴

Below in the "valley of the furnaces" was another world in the making. Thousands of landless farmers from the surrounding counties, particularly blacks, were rapidly drawn into the orbit of industrial production. By 1900, 55 percent of Alabama's coal miners and 65 percent of its iron and steel workers were black. Overall, African-Americans made up more than 90 percent of Birmingham's unskilled labor force by 1910, thus constituting one of the largest black urban communities in the New South. As in any other New South urban community, race penetrated all aspects of the city's life. Segregation ordinances proliferated between 1900 and 1905, and Alabama's move to disfranchise blacks reduced the state's black voters from 100,000 to a negligible 3,700 after 1901.⁵ Segregation in the public sphere reinforced the development of a separate black social and cultural

world. Yet unlike Northern urban centers such as New York or Chicago, where blacks were concentrated in one or two dense sections of the city, Birmingham's blacks resided in several segregated pockets situated along creekbeds, railroad lines, and alleys near the downtown area. Black working-class neighborhoods throughout the first three decades of the twentieth century suffered from lack of streetlights, paved streets, sewers, and other city services. Birmingham was an unmistakably segregated city, but spatially there was no single, identifiable black community to speak of. Excluding the greater Birmingham area and the surrounding industrial suburbs, the central core of black residence settled along the Twentieth Street axis from the southern section of the city toward the railroad tracks which ran through downtown.⁶

Not all blacks toiled in the mines, mills, kitchens, and streets of Birmingham. A tiny but influential black elite established a flourishing business district along Eighteenth Street in the heart of downtown. As early as 1890, the Reverend W. R. Pettiford founded and presided over Birmingham's first black bank, the Alabama Penny Savings and Loan. And black residents often boasted of their millionaire inventor, Andrew J. Beard, or the affluent funeral director and insurance magnate, C. M. Harris. Black businessmen and religious leaders made their fortunes from a consumer base of working-class blacks, insured peaceful relations by creating alliances with white industrialists, and a handful secured enough "respectability" to retain the franchise. Like the white elite, they maintained their own exclusive social clubs and rarely interacted with poor blacks. While the Negro Federation of Women's Clubs and allied organizations occasionally focused on social welfare issues, black Birmingham's numerous religious and literary societies occupied a great deal of the black middle-class woman's time.⁷

The black elite could not always find complete satisfaction in material wealth when they, too, were denied basic democratic rights. Some black middle-class spokesmen searched for autonomous alternatives to Jim Crow within and without the region. African colonization and other emigration schemes were proposed by blacks and white liberals during the late nineteenth century, and in Oxford, Alabama, in 1899, a group of leading black citizens established one of the nation's first all-black towns. In virtually every case of black political assertion, however, the white status quo only recognized as spokespersons for the African-American community the black elite, whether followers of the accommodationist teachings of Booker T. Washington or the Back-to-Africa movement of Bishop Henry McNeil Turner. And rarely was the black elite's self-appointed leadership challenged by the masses of blacks.⁸

The newly created industrial complex also attracted significant numbers of immigrants from Northern mining communities or directly from Europe. By 1890 first- and second-generation immigrants, particularly Italians, Scots, Germans, and Britons, comprised nearly one-fourth of Birmingham's white population—a substantial number for the urban South. More striking is the fact that in 1910 one-half of the coal, iron, and steel workers were immigrants, many of whom had been skilled colliers and metal workers before moving South. As Southern whites left the farm to take advantage of Birmingham's employment opportunities, the percentage of immigrants in the labor force declined precipitously. Although thousands of white migrants found their way into the cotton mills and lumber yards in other parts of the state, a large portion joined black workers and immigrants in the mines and steel factories.⁹

During the first three decades of the twentieth century thousands of Southern women also left the farm and found work in the greater Birmingham area or simply labored as unpaid workers in the households of their husbands who toiled in the mines and mills. The proletarianization of white females drawn to the state's rapidly growing textile industry hardly affected Birmingham; textile factories there employed only 283 women in 1930. The city's 8,038 white working women were scattered in dozens of occupations, mainly clerical and professional pursuits. Although limited wartime industrialization led to an increase in white female wage labor, by 1930 most white women worked as housewives. In fact, despite numerical increases, the percentage of women wage earners in the state decreased from 40.9 percent in 1910 to 25.5 percent in 1930. And this figure mainly indicates the status of white women, of whom 85 percent were reportedly housewives in 1930. In 1920 black women comprised 60 percent of the city's 20,082 female workers, and of that number 87 percent were engaged in domestic work.¹⁰

The thousands of women and men who streamed into Birmingham searching for opportunities made up the cheap labor force from which local capitalists could make their fortunes. Yet the city's young proletariat was by no means docile. On the contrary, many had had some organizing experience. Two decades prior to the Populist upheaval of the 1890s, James T. Rapier, black leader of the Labor Union of Alabama, an affiliate of the newly formed National Labor Union, attempted to organize black industrial and agricultural workers throughout the state. More significantly, the Knights of Labor and the Greenback-Labor party established a tradition of militant, interracial unionism among Birmingham coal miners. Blacks comprised the majority of Greenback-Labor supporters in the Birmingham district before the party dissolved in 1880. Working among black and white

coal miners and lumber workers throughout Alabama, the Knights proved quite effective, establishing a number of local assemblies in Jefferson County. While Knights led several small strikes in Alabama's coal fields between 1882 and 1885, the organization on a national level began to decline after 1886, partly because of antilabor hysteria following the Haymarket Affair, the emergence of the AFL, and the leadership's decision to adopt a no-strike pledge.¹¹

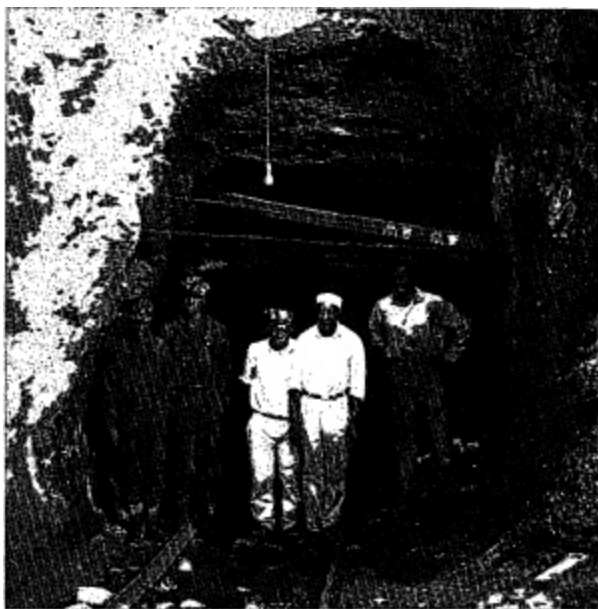
The UMW (a local movement distinct from the UMWA), founded by ex-Knights and rural migrants who brought agrarian radicalism to the mines and mills,¹² continued organizing Birmingham workers until it was crushed during the coal miners' strike of 1894. Late in the decade, however, national leadership in the UMWA reinvigorated organized labor in Alabama's coal mines and began a campaign to rebuild the union. All three organizations left a remarkable record of labor activity: of 603 strikes initiated by Alabama's workers between 1881 and 1936, 303 took place during 1881–1905. But as the twentieth century approached, white workers began to drift away from the UMWA; during both the 1904 and 1908 coal miners' strikes, black workers were in the majority. Taking advantage of the large black presence in the UMWA, employers adeptly used racist propaganda, violence, and black convict labor to weaken unionism in Alabama's coal fields.¹³

In the aftermath of the 1908 strike, TCI executive George Gordon Crawford adopted the paternalistic methods of the parent company, United States Steel, as a bulwark against unionism and to create a more stable labor force. Because of poor working conditions, dilapidated housing, overburdened public facilities, and polluted water supplies, the turnover rate for Birmingham labor hovered around 400 percent. Crawford sought to turn the situation around by establishing workers' villages with decent, well-constructed homes, playgrounds, schools, churches, and health facilities for employees. These segregated company-owned settlements were laid out in greater Birmingham's industrial suburbs, especially North Birmingham, Woodlawn, Ensley, Greenwood, Collegeville, Smithfield, and Fairfield. The city of Bessemer established a similar residential pattern in which miners and some steel workers lived in company-owned double-tenant "shotgun" houses. By 1920 over 17,000 workers lived in homes maintained by various industrial concerns and ranging in quality from well-constructed wood frame houses to shoddy dwellings of board and batten construction. Although conditions improved in many company communities and the turnover rate dropped significantly to 5.1 percent in 1930, TCI exercised greater control over workers' lives.¹⁴

The UMWA in Alabama was temporarily crushed after World War I,

more the result of state violence and race baiting than TCI's paternalistic policies. Disaster followed when Birmingham coal miners, three-quarters of whom were black, struck for higher wages in 1919, and again in 1920. Backed by state troops dispatched by Governor Thomas Kilby, TCI crushed the strike as well as the UMWA in Alabama. The union's collapse marked the end of biracial unionism in Alabama until the 1930s.¹⁵

Iron ore miners and iron and steel workers did not establish the same tradition of interracial unionism during this period. The Metal Trades Council of Birmingham concentrated its efforts exclusively on skilled workers, ignoring black workers who comprised nearly one-half of the steel and iron workers and 70 percent of the ore miners. Given the unwritten racial quota on occupational mobility and the slowness of technological change in the iron and steel industry, black workers remained unskilled and, therefore, unorganized. In the iron ore mines, mass industrial organizing efforts were not only met with force and violence, but company officials used racist propaganda to keep black and white workers divided. Attempted strikes in 1918 and 1919 left the nascent industrial organizing campaign in shambles, and hundreds of dedicated union men, black and white, were blacklisted during the years that followed.¹⁶



Black convict laborers, Banner Mine, Alabama (courtesy Birmingham Public Library)

The swelling ranks of women workers remained largely unorganized, and middle-class women's reform movements barely

took notice of female toilers, particularly black women. Black domestic laborers, the majority of the female work force, were considered unorganizable and unimportant and thus were virtually invisible in the eyes of white male labor organizers. White middle-class women initiated a vibrant reform movement around woman suffrage, the YWCA movement, child labor reform, and opposition to convict labor. But middle-class reformers excluded poor white women and often—especially in the case of woman suffrage—exhibited hostilities toward their darker sisters. In the end, a dynamic women's interracial movement did not spring up in Birmingham as it had in areas such as Atlanta and Memphis.¹⁷

With the death of the Knights of Labor, working-class radicalism had few organized outlets. The Socialist party was visibly active in the state around the turn of the century, claiming four hundred members in 1908. The Socialists eventually attracted a small following among poor white farmers in Baldwin, Bibb, Covington, and Cullman counties and among a handful of Birmingham skilled workers. It reached its peak in electoral strength in 1912 when Alabamians cast 3,029 votes, 2.6 percent of the state's electorate, for Eugene Debs. In Birmingham the only Socialist who held office was Arlie K. Barber, a staunchly anticorporate suburban druggist elected to the city commission in 1915.¹⁸

Unlike Louisiana and parts of Texas, where Southern Socialists organized blacks—albeit in separate locals—in Alabama the SPA was strictly a “white man's party.”¹⁹ In 1905, Montgomery Socialist E. F. Andrews maintained that organizing blacks, especially on an integrated basis, would have disastrous results. Northern Socialists did not understand, he explained in 1905, that white Southerners were surrounded by “some eight millions of more or less civilized people, belonging to a race in a stage of evolution so far removed from our own that for aught we can see at present, assimilation must be impossible for an indefinite period.” Like many other Southern Socialists, Andrews believed the time was ripe for propagandizing the Socialists' cause but feared organizing blacks would lead to charges of fostering social equality.²⁰

The decade after World War I was marked by unsettling social and economic transformations affecting all strata of Birmingham society. Following two decades of mercurial growth, conservative values clashed with the course of industrialization. Xenophobia, racism, and rigid moralism informed mainstream politics in Birmingham during the 1920s, lasting well into the 1930s. White supremacist groups organized by some of the city's leading citizens hoped to establish order and a degree of cultural homogenization through intimidation

and violence. The Ku Klux Klan, in particular, enjoyed huge numerical and financial support during the 1920s, emerging as one of the city's most powerful political forces. Klansmen sought to cleanse their city of Jews, Catholics, labor agitators, and recalcitrant African-Americans who refused to accept "their place" in the hierarchy of race.²¹ A large number of poor whites were also drawn to this essentially middle-class Protestant movement, but their participation did not improve the squalid poverty many were forced to endure long before the stock market crash of 1929.

Organized labor did not completely buy into the reactionary tendencies of Southern "Jazz Age" politics. Although industrial unionism lay prostrate, craft unions successfully fought for municipal reforms and sustained a dynamic involvement in local politics after World War I. Robert La Follette's Farmer-Labor party, for instance, received nearly 12 percent of the votes in Jefferson County. The *Labor Advocate*, journal of the Birmingham Trades Council, sustained somewhat of an urban populist tradition. It not only fought rising rents in working-class neighborhoods but supported the single-tax movement and called for municipal ownership of public utilities. A. H. Cather's eclectic *Southern Labor Review*, though not an official publication of the Birmingham labor movement, combined both radical and conservative tendencies. Cather outrightly attacked capitalism, called for unity of farmers and workers, advocated "cooperationism" under Christian principles, yet was among the most avid supporters of the temperance movement.²² Nonetheless, it is difficult to assess the impact of the labor press during the 1920s when all that remained of the labor movement after 1922 was fragmented craft unionism. Nativism, racism, and the violence which accompanied these attitudes served as an effective bulwark against the resurgence of an already emaciated labor movement.

The war and postwar period altered black lives fundamentally. Northern employment opportunities and Southern injustice compelled a substantial portion of Southern blacks to make their way North, although several thousand rural migrants first tested the urban South. Because the expansion of Birmingham's industrial complex also drew vast numbers of black people from rural Alabama and Georgia into the steel and iron mills, the influx into the already overcrowded and highly segregated metropolis led to a deterioration of living conditions. Moreover, the country's failure to fulfill wartime promises of equality and the renewed militancy of returning war veterans left race relations in Birmingham unusually tense. Compounded by the struggles of black miners during the violent strikes of 1919 and 1920–21, postwar Birmingham could have erupted much like Chicago; indeed, authorities anticipated riots in the "Magic City."²³

Nevertheless, the ways in which postwar black radicalism manifested itself in most of the country were not duplicated in Alabama. Besides emigration schemes that had no apparent connection with the UNIA, Garveyism had few organized followers among black Alabamians. In 1922, a small group of UNIA adherents lived in Neenah and Camden, Alabama, and a handful of North Birmingham residents read the Garveyite tabloid, the *Negro World*, and contributed funds to the UNIA nationally; but there is no evidence that an active chapter ever existed in Birmingham.²⁴ By 1923, the UNIA had established divisions in Mobile and neighboring Prichard, Alabama, but these chapters were quite small: in 1926, the Prichard Division, Alabama's largest UNIA division, reported only eleven dues-paying members.²⁵

Responding to racial tensions and rising expectations, branches of the NAACP were established in several Alabama cities, including Birmingham, Selma, Uniontown, Blocton, Anniston, Tuscaloosa, and Montgomery. These branches, established by black middle-class leaders, intended to redirect black resistance toward more respectable avenues. The Birmingham branch, for instance, grew directly out of the Colored Citizens' League of Bessemer, an organization of ministers and businessmen founded in 1916. In 1919 the league created a committee on race relations in order to quell potential violence, and out of this postwar committee emerged the Birmingham branch of the NAACP.²⁶

The NAACP in Alabama could not sustain the immediate postwar enthusiasm for black organization. Although the Birmingham chapter claimed nearly a thousand members in 1919, in less than three years its membership dropped to a dismal thirty-six, and in 1923 it reported only fourteen dues-paying members. Five years later, the branch ceased operating altogether. Similarly, the Montgomery branch, founded in 1918, ballooned to six hundred in 1919, only to dwindle to a paltry forty-three dues-paying members a year later. Ku Klux Klan intimidation and other forms of repression partly explain the rapid demise of the NAACP during the 1920s, but racial violence notwithstanding, the association's local leadership ignored the problems black working people faced daily. The Birmingham branch's agenda focused more on the city's black business interests than on racial violence, the denial of civil liberties, and the immediate problems confronting the poor. The black middle class's silence was broken briefly in 1926, however, by a black Birmingham school teacher named Indiana Little. Six years after white women won the right to vote, Little led a predominantly female crowd of one thousand to the steps of Jefferson County courthouse and demanded an immediate end to black disfranchisement. City officials refused to hear her arguments and arrested her for vagrancy.²⁷

In the final analysis, white middle-class reformism was more concerned with working people's moral behavior than their economic well-being, and black middle-class reformism, with its mild pleas for a junior partnership in democracy, was crushed to earth. Shorn of effective organization, workers approached a new decade on the threshold of economic disaster. The urban South began to feel the effects of the Great Depression as early as 1927, two years before the stock market crash. The Birmingham Trades Council reported an unemployment rate of 18 percent in February 1928, and between 1926 and 1929 the Jefferson County Red Cross's relief rolls more than doubled. Huge numbers of black and white workers were laid off in 1929 when TCI shut down two blast furnaces in Bessemer. A year later, coal production had reached its lowest level since 1921, pig iron output had dropped by over 41 percent, and to exacerbate an already desperate situation, Jefferson County experienced a surge of migrants hoping to escape rural poverty. And although poor blacks, particularly recent arrivals from the rural areas, had suffered steady economic deterioration since the postwar recession, whites suddenly found themselves faced with similar circumstances. Most striking is the fact that the percentage of white workers on the county relief rolls jumped from 14.5 percent in 1926 to 32.5 percent in 1930.²⁸

By 1930, black and white working people had very little in the way of organizational power, and in the shadow of a decade of Klan violence and racist backlash within the labor movement, the prospects of interracial unity seemed unrealizable. As the effects of the depression began to take their toll, workers, particularly blacks, had few weapons against plant shutdowns and massive layoffs.

Part I: The Underground, 1929–1935

We was up against some pretty rough terror. Those days was rough. You couldn't pitty-pat with people. We had that that we'd tell people —when you join, it's just like the army, but it's not the army of the bosses, it's the army of the working class, organizing to make things get better.

—Hosea Hudson

With our few pennies that we collected we ground out leaflets on an old rickety mimeograph machine, which we kept concealed in the home of one of our workers. We were obliged to work very quietly, like the Abolitionists in the South during the Civil War, behind drawn shades and locked doors.

—Angelo Herndon

Chapter One: An Invisible Army

Jobs, Relief, and the Birth of a Movement

We were the slaves in Pharaoh's land
You and he and I,
And we were serfs to feudal hands
Now that times gone by.
Prentices in cities, prisoners for debt.
Hunted vagrants, parish poor,
Our life is a lie.
We move an invisible army. . . .

—“*All of Us Together*” (Southern labor song, ca. 1930s)

For Communists eager to get on with the task of revolution, the South was a new, mysterious frontier. Arriving in Gastonia, North Carolina, Chattanooga, Tennessee, Greenville, South Carolina, and Birmingham, Alabama, they brought with them the cultural and ideological baggage of a Northern, urban-based movement, including assumptions about the backwardness of Southern workers. Yet, gnawing at the edges of their preconceptions was a policy that situated Southern blacks at the heart of the region's revolutionary movement. Following nearly a decade of resolutions and reassessments on the “Negro Question,” in 1928 the Sixth World Congress of the Communist International insisted that blacks concentrated in the black belt counties of the Deep South constituted an oppressed nation. This region, dominated by cotton plantations, consisted of counties with a numerical black majority. As an oppressed nation, the resolution maintained, African-Americans had the right to self-determination: political power, control over the economy, and the right to secede from the United States. In 1930 the resolution was altered to account for the differences between North and South. Northern blacks, the new resolution argued, sought integration and assimilation, and therefore the demand for self-determination was to be applied exclusively to the South.¹

The new position opened a new chapter in CPUSA history. With the

possible exceptions of B. H. Lauderdale, a white Communist from Becken-bridge, Texas, who tried unsuccessfully to place the Communist Party on the ballot in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama in 1922, and William Z. Foster, who orchestrated a Southern presidential campaign tour in 1928, the Party never ventured south before 1929. Apparently unaware of the region's own history of working-class and rural radicalism, national Communist leaders presumed the South to be an impenetrable bastion of racist conservatism and derided the notion that Southern blacks had their own radical tradition. Communist John Owens opposed bringing Southern blacks into the Party because "the vast majority of southern Negroes are not revolutionary, not even radical. Given a society of peace, prosperity and security, they are content to drift through life."²

On the other hand, Southerners evaluated Northern radicals through their own ideological lenses. When the Communists entered the Magic City to extend their form of immigrant, urban, working-class radicalism to the industrial South, they entered a world unaccustomed to "Reds" outside the pale of mythology. Residents became familiar with Communism through radio and newspapers or through hearsay and urban folklore—stories of North Carolina textile strikers were hardly ignored by Southerners, black or white.³ Popular myths of evil Reds wishing only to sow the seeds of discord were intended to neutralize the Party's message. But the depression had hit Alabama so hard that many working people, especially blacks, viewed hunger and joblessness as the greater evil. Thus, for some the Communists were devils incarnate; for others they were avenging angels. But for all Birminghamians the CP was a new and strange addition to the Southern landscape.

The Central Committee of the CPUSA chose Birmingham, the center of heavy industry in the South, as headquarters for the newly established District 17, encompassing Alabama, Georgia, Louisiana, Florida, Tennessee, and Mississippi. Located on the fringe of the black belt, Birmingham also served as a jumping-off point for the organization of sharecroppers and agricultural workers.⁴ The first full-time organizers in Birmingham were Tom Johnson and Harry Jackson, two veteran white Communists who had been active trade union organizers in the North. Johnson had worked in Cleveland, and Harry Jackson had spent considerable time as a longshoreman in San Francisco. The precise moment of their arrival is rather hazy, but they were visibly active late in 1929, having established contact with Italian metal worker James Giglio before arriving. Giglio had earlier written to the CP-led TUUL in New York and shortly thereafter established a Birmingham chapter of the Metal Workers Industrial League. Through Giglio, Johnson met with black TCI workers in

Ensley, an industrial suburb of Birmingham, and subsequently recruited the first Communist Party unit at a street-corner meeting in a black section of town. The Party even opened an office downtown (2117 1/2 Second Ave. North), though its presence was brief. A few weeks later, on March 23, 1930, the TUUL held its first mass meeting. Some two hundred participants, about three-quarters of whom were black, piled into the Joy Boys Dance Hall in downtown Birmingham to hear speeches by Giglio, Tom Johnson, and Walter Lewis, a newly recruited black steel worker from Montgomery. The meeting went without incident, but within days Giglio's home was firebombed.⁵

The bombing was enough to convince Party leaders to lie low for the next two months. Meanwhile, the Central Committee dispatched an additional veteran organizer to strengthen the Birmingham cadre. Fresh from a year in the Soviet Union, the twenty-four-year-old, New York-born Frank Burns had been an active Communist since 1926. Bolstered by Burns's appointment, the Party resumed its organizing efforts with a mass meeting on May 22, at which Tom Johnson delivered a poignant address before a sympathetic and predominantly black crowd of over two hundred. Citing examples of recent lynchings in Georgia and Texas to excoriate Southern racism, Johnson proposed the idea of black self-determination in the black belt, advocated social and economic equality for blacks, and was reported to have "lauded the Soviet government." The other two speakers, Burns and Walter Lewis, called for the abolition of segregation in the city's cafes and public transportation and strongly condemned racism as the stumbling block to improving all workers' lives.⁶

The meeting made a lasting impression on several participants, including an eighteen-year-old black coal miner named Angelo Herndon, whose incarceration for organizing black and white workers in Atlanta two years later would make him one of the most celebrated black Communists in the country. Born on May 6, 1913, in the steel and coal mining town of Wyoming, Ohio, Herndon and his thirteen brothers and sisters grew up amid poverty. Herndon's mother, a very religious woman who had hoped young Angelo would choose the ministry as his livelihood, was left alone to care for fourteen children after the death of her husband. At age thirteen, Herndon and one of his brothers left home in search of jobs, eventually finding work in the coal mines of Birmingham. The grueling labor and unfair practices of coal operators ignited a number of confrontations between groups of workers and foremen—encounters that would eventually play a significant role in Herndon's radicalization. Persuaded by the Party's commitment to social justice and racial equality, Herndon joined the Communists and quickly became one of Birmingham's most active organizers.⁷

As the summer approached, Communists moved their gatherings from indoor halls to outdoor parks. In May, about seven hundred blacks and one hundred whites gathered in Capitol Park to demand relief for unemployed workers and to protest the recent arrests of six Communists in Atlanta. The organizers then led an impromptu march to the Birmingham Community Chest headquarters to demand immediate relief but were turned away by nearly one hundred police officers.⁸ The incident prompted city commissioner Jimmie Jones to conduct a full-scale investigation into radical activities and to introduce a strict criminal anarchy ordinance to “curb communism.” Passed unanimously by the city commission on June 17, 1930, the new ordinance made it unlawful for anyone to advocate “criminal anarchy” by print or word of mouth or to be a member of an organization which does so. Conviction could result in fines up to \$100 and 180 days in jail.⁹

In defiance of the new ordinance, the Communists held an open meeting to elect delegates to the National Convention on Unemployment in Chicago, and a few days later a group of 250 black workers attended a demonstration in Capitol Park. The Party's disregard of the new law, compounded by heightened racial tensions surrounding black congressman Oscar DePriest's announced visit to Birmingham, induced greater police repression. During a demonstration in Wilson Park held on June 28, city detectives arrested several Communists, including leading black organizer Gilbert Lewis, charging them with “advocating social equality between whites and negroes.” Earlier that day, Tom Johnson and Oscar DePriest were burned in effigy by a mob of whites.¹⁰

Throughout the summer, Birmingham police invoked the criminal anarchy ordinance to arrest known activists and raid the homes of black workers suspected of possessing radical literature. Although the arrests led to few convictions and the charges were usually dropped or reduced to vagrancy violations,¹¹ the constant harassment took its toll on Party work. Conceding that the repression in the South was much greater than elsewhere, the district bureau formulated plans for creating armed and unarmed defense corps in Birmingham and Chattanooga. The unarmed groups were to be trained in street fighting tactics to protect demonstrators and delay police, while the select armed corps was supposed to protect organizers in mining camps and other isolated areas. Although the armed defense corps were apparently never activated, Communist leaders kept firearms for self-defense and occasionally pawned them when funds were low. When police raids failed to turn up documents, guns were often confiscated.¹²

In the midst of heightened police repression, the Party initiated a Southern-based radical weekly and established a workers' school for its new recruits. At the behest of the Central Committee, twenty-four-year-old James S. Allen (né Sol Auerbach) left his post as editor of the *Labor Defender*, the journal of the ILD, and traveled south with his wife and comrade, Isabelle Allen, and a paltry sum of \$200 to launch the *Southern Worker*. Datelined Birmingham in order to confuse police, it was originally published in Chattanooga where anti-Communist repression was not as great.¹³ The first issue of the *Southern Worker* appeared on August 16, 1930. Selling for two cents a copy, three thousand copies were printed and distributed throughout Tennessee, Alabama, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Allen's first editorial statement described the new publication as "a paper of and for both the white and black workers and farmers: It recognizes only one division, the bosses against the workers and the workers against the bosses." The only way to achieve the demands of the working class, he reasoned, was through proletarian revolution. Surprisingly, the editorial statement did not mention the Party's position on self-determination in the black belt, and it contained very little discussion regarding the specific struggles of African-Americans. The paper's credo notwithstanding, so much space was devoted to the problems of black working people that Southern-born white Communists occasionally commented on the paper's perceived problack bias. In a letter to the editor, one white Party member complained that he could not sell subscriptions for a paper that "devotes 90 percent of its news to Negroes and 10 percent to whites."¹⁴

Allen had good reason to devote more space to black working people. From the beginning, Birmingham blacks exhibited a greater interest in the Party than did whites. The Communists' original cadre of three organizers in 1929 was augmented to over ninety by the end of August 1930, and over five hundred working people populated the Party's mass organizations, of whom between 80 and 90 percent were black.¹⁵ There was little doubt in the minds of district organizers that "Negroes ... are the decisive strata among [the] toiling masses in the South." During the 1930 election campaign, the Communist Party did what no political party had done in Alabama since Reconstruction: it endorsed a black candidate, Walter Lewis, for governor. The election platform included complete racial equality and maintained that the exercise of self-determination in the black belt was the only way to end lynching and achieve political rights for Southern blacks.¹⁶

Alarmed by the Communist Party's growing support among black working people, leading white citizens and government officials temporarily breathed a sigh of relief when a congressional committee to investigate "communist propaganda" under Congressman Hamilton

Fish decided to hold hearings in Birmingham. Predictably, as the Communists in Birmingham assailed the hearings as part of a sustained effort to outlaw the CP, local authorities and the press expressed confidence that the Fish Committee would end the radical menace once and for all. The hearings intensified anti-Communist hysteria, as various witnesses described the intricate workings of a secret, foreign-led movement whose predominantly black ranks numbered up to eight thousand strong in Alabama alone. In retrospect, these exaggerations are astounding since the Birmingham CP possessed just over one hundred members at the time.¹⁷

The publicity surrounding the hearings did not hinder the Party's growth that fall. Party units were established in three metal shops, in a mine, and on a cotton plantation some forty miles north of Birmingham, and Communists employed by the U.S. Pipe Company began publishing a shop newsletter entitled the *Red Hammer*. By late 1930 the Party had spread beyond the borders of Jefferson County and gained a few adherents among white farmers and miners in the northern Alabama counties of Cullman, Winston, Walker, St. Clair, Morgan, and Marshall—a region with a Republican, Populist, and to a lesser degree, Socialist tradition. In January 1931, Tom Johnson helped a group of Cullman County farmers form the Alabama Farmers' Relief Fund, an affiliate of the Communist-led United Farmers' League in North Dakota, and within two months at least nine small locals were scattered throughout the state.¹⁸

At the Seventh National Convention in June 1930, Party leaders elected to postpone the ambitious industrial organizing drive in Alabama in favor of a campaign that would focus on the immediate needs of the jobless. Central Committee as well as local Party leaders realized that, because of recent plant closures, the pressing need for work or relief eclipsed all other issues affecting Birmingham workers. The demand for jobs was so great that numerous independent efforts were launched by industrialists and middle-class organizations to relieve the situation. In addition to sponsoring public works projects, in 1930 the chamber of commerce worked out a plan through which meal tickets redeemable at participating restaurants could be purchased by needy citizens. The League of Women Voters instituted a "clean up, paint up, repair up" campaign in an attempt to relieve unemployment, but these efforts did little to remedy the situation. There was, however, one organized effort generated from the working class itself that was independent of, and even hostile to, the Communist Party. In April 1930, white labor organizer John Bago formed an all-white unemployed organization with about one hundred members. When one of its members suggested a march on city hall to demand \$50,000 from the Board of Revenue, Bago opposed the idea,

labeling such a march “communistic.” Having achieved nothing tangible, the organization disbanded within a few months.¹⁹

As the winter approached, the CP stepped up its own relief campaign by holding a series of demonstrations to draw attention to the plight of the jobless. In preparation for a rally in Capitol Park in September, local Communists issued a leaflet that spoke directly to Birmingham's growing number of homeless. “White and colored workers are being evicted from their homes and thrown out on the streets to shift for themselves. Gas and water is [*sic*] being cut off because the unemployed workers can not pay their bills.” Although police arrested organizers Angelo Herndon and Tom Johnson on the day of the rally, a large and restive crowd of blacks gathered and remained in Capitol Park until police turned them away.²⁰

A few weeks later, the Metal Workers Industrial League planned a mass meeting of unemployed steel workers in Ensley to demand immediate relief, an end to evictions, free light and heat for the city's jobless, and to reaffirm their support for a Communist-sponsored social insurance bill that proposed minimum cash assistance of twenty-five dollars per week to all unemployed workers. Under the slogan “Organize and Fight! Don't Starve,” the league drew an estimated twenty-five hundred steel workers, but the meeting was postponed after its principal speaker, Harry Jackson, was detained by police. One of the more dramatic instances of mass confrontation occurred on December 16, 1930. Joe Burton, an eighteen-year-old black YCL activist, led a spontaneous demonstration of workers who had congregated at a bridge construction site seeking work. Burton persuaded the crowd—which had grown to nearly five thousand according to Party sources—to storm the lobby of the Hotel Morris and demand jobs or immediate relief, but police intervened and dispersed the gathering.²¹

The vast majority of Birmingham poor probably thought the Communists were fighting a lost cause. The political and financial power of the city's corporate interests seemed unassailable to most people, and the militance with which the Communists challenged authority might have appeared suicidal. The depression certainly devastated most working families, but economic need alone did not drive large numbers of unemployed into the arms of the Communist Party. Sons and daughters of the land, many black workers had lived through winters as sharecroppers with few resources available and had learned dozens of creative methods of survival. In addition to performing odd jobs in exchange for food, obtaining grocery store throwaways, selling roasted peanuts on the streets, and hauling and selling firewood, coal was appropriated from the mines and railroads

and sold or used as fuel. Empty homes were occasionally torn apart by the poor desperately in need of fuel. Individuals who might not have benefited directly from the stolen wood took advantage of the vacancies by obtaining free rent in exchange for “protecting” some landlord's private property.²²

Urban cultivation was the most common survival strategy, as both a source of additional food as well as cash income. During the depression, one Birmingham woman recalls, “everybody had chickens, hogs, and a garden.” Urban gardens proliferated rapidly during the depression: in Jefferson County the number of farms increased 94 percent between 1930 and 1935, yet the average size per farm decreased from 53.4 acres to 30.6 acres. Jobless and underemployed workers invested in various forms of livestock, from milk cows to pigs, and plots of land were cultivated, ranging in size from small vegetable gardens to thirty- or forty-acre farms. Cultivation generally took place on company property in the coal and ore mines as well as in the industrial suburbs and back alleys. A 1934 study of Birmingham's working-class communities located 7,595 pigs and 1,996 cows within the city limits, the vast majority belonging to black families.²³ These methods of survival kept some families off the relief rolls, but for most unemployed or workers whose hours had been cut back substantially, welfare was also a necessary supplement. TCI's elaborate welfare system, established just before the outbreak of World War I, was extremely limited. Workers paid all health care expenses through monthly fees levied on their paychecks, and although TCI provided unemployed relief, such assistance had to be paid back. Employees unable to pay rent on company-owned homes were not automatically evicted; the accumulated rent payments were deferred to a later date, and heat, electricity, and water were cut off immediately.²⁴

In an effort to curtail unemployment, the city commission proposed a \$500,000 bond issue early in 1931 to create employment opportunities through public works projects. The twelve hundred jobs it created, however, paid only twenty-five cents an hour for three eight-hour days. The city's relief program, in the eyes of one black worker, was worse than slavery: “In slavery times, I am told, the master would put good shirts and overalls on you and today we can't even eat on \$6 a week.” The Communists assailed the plan as a scheme to cut wages that would result in a bureaucratic haven for graft and corruption. In its place, the Party called for a government relief program that would provide the unemployed with a weekly minimum of ten dollars cash relief, free coal, carfare, and a minimum of twenty dollars per week for city relief jobs, and would protect the jobless from evictions and utilities shutoffs.²⁵

Municipal and county governments' inadequate resources left the Red Cross to bear the brunt of Birmingham's relief needs. Its monthly expenditures increased from \$6,000 in 1929 to \$180,000 by July 1933, and the number of cases rose from 450 in 1929 to 20,914 in 1933. The Red Cross's case load was supposed to have been transferred back to city and county governments in 1930, but the city could not afford the burden and county officials refused the undertaking. The paltry \$1,000 monthly subsidy offered by the city did little to relieve the Red Cross's burden.²⁶

Birmingham's unemployed found little beneficence working for the Red Cross, whose public improvement projects involved demolishing abandoned buildings, rebuilding rural schools, draining lowland areas, and gardening. In a letter to the *Daily Worker*, a black Birmingham worker complained that the "Red Cross boss stands with a pistol over us while we work, like we are prisoners working out a term." These conditions were compounded by the fact that the Red Cross's relief payments were among the lowest in the country. To make matters worse, by August 1932 the Birmingham Red Cross had stopped providing cash relief altogether, offering only food, fuel, and medication.²⁷

Throughout the spring and summer of 1931, the Party and the unemployed councils held a series of demonstrations against the Red Cross in North Birmingham, calling for a complete boycott of the Birmingham Community Chest. The unemployed councils also sent a communication to the governor and the state legislature criticizing the Red Cross's efforts as inadequate and demanding that the issue of unemployment relief "take precedence over all questions before the legislature." The councils' leaders requested, among other things, free utilities for all unemployed and underemployed workers, provisions for opening all schools and free lunch for school children, and the right to vote without restrictions and irrespective of race.²⁸

Having little faith in petitions and boycotts, Communists organized neighborhood relief committees to present their demands to the Birmingham welfare board and to deal with members' specific grievances on an individual basis. These committees also fought evictions and foreclosures, but unlike militants in New York or Chicago, they tried to avoid confrontations with authorities by adopting more evasive tactics, ranging from flooding landlords with postcards and letters to simple reasoning. Representatives of the unemployed councils often dissuaded landlords from evicting their tenants by describing the potential devastation that could occur once an abandoned house became a free-for-all for firewood. When a family's electricity was shut off for nonpayment, activists from the

unemployed council frequently used heavy-gauge copper wires as “jumpers” to appropriate electricity from public outlets or other homes. Council members also found ways to reactivate water mains after they had been turned off, though the process was more complicated than pilfering electricity. And in at least one instance, a group of black women used verbal threats to stop a city employee from turning off one family's water supplies.²⁹

Women frequently assumed leadership in the neighborhood relief committees, usually because the economic downturn directly impinged upon their designated roles as mothers, housewives, and workers. Black female domestics experienced layoffs, speedups (employers used the threat of competition to extract more work over less time), and wage cuts because of overall cutbacks in the use of paid household labor and the increasing utilization of labor-saving devices. Without the benefit of sick pay, vacations, or regular hours, some women toiled in white kitchens for as low as \$1.50 to \$2.00 per week. Wages were so low during the 1930s that many women earned just enough to pay their rent and lived day-to-day on the food they “toted” from their employers kitchens.³⁰ According to the 1930 Census, approximately 82 percent of, or 16,000, black female wage earners were engaged in domestic services, and in 1935 at least 8,000 black female domestic workers had registered with the Alabama Employment Service.³¹

The lack of domestic work was compounded by the dearth of employment opportunities for women. Dominated by the steel, iron ore, and coal mining industries of the Birmingham-Bessemer industrial complex, most other avenues for employment were closed to black and white working women. Because most black working-class families relied on two incomes, women usually combined wage labor and housework. As conditions worsened, the burden of providing for their families increasingly fell upon the shoulders of women, especially black single mothers in the city. With few job opportunities and the burden of child rearing, women were more dependent than men on various forms of private and public relief. Moreover, some husbands chose to leave so that their families might receive more relief, because of domestic conflict, or in some cases, because they were simply tired of the responsibility.³²

The neighborhood relief committees became the key organizations for attracting black women to the CP. Helen Longs, a cleaning woman in a furniture store and a mother, joined the Party because of its opposition to the Red Cross. Estelle Milner, a young black school teacher in Birmingham, became a Communist through her work with the urban and rural poor. In addition to organizing sharecroppers in

Tallapoosa County, she led a group of Birmingham women who fought for reforms in public health care. This cadre of women radicals, which included other leaders such as Cornelia Foreman, Alice Mosley, and an elderly bookkeeper named Addie Adkins, won the admiration of their neighbors and comrades. Communist organizer and novelist Myra Page described this group of black Birmingham women, who fought to “get them women outa their kitchens,” in a series of short stories published in the Communist newspaper, *Working Woman*.³³ The struggle for welfare and other forms of relief also attracted a tiny group of working-class white women to the unemployed councils and subsequently into the ranks of the CP. Alabama-born Communist Mary Leonard succeeded in bringing together a group of five white women, under the auspices of the unemployed councils, that confronted officials at the city's welfare board and won several demands, including food, clothing, and medical attention for the families of several unemployed whites.³⁴

Food and supplies were not the only issues in the women's fight against the Red Cross and city welfare. Birmingham relief applicants resented the social workers' harsh, condescending manner, and many demanded to be accorded dignity and respect.³⁵ Perhaps the worst aspect of relief was dealing with investigators who visited homes unannounced to determine whether an applicant was truly in need. Red Cross and city welfare officials occasionally required applicants to sell personal belongings considered superfluous, such as radios, watches, clothes, or new furniture. Possession of too much food or a large garden could result in an immediate cancellation of assistance. One Birmingham resident remembers the demeaning practice in which investigators would “Look in your sugar. Look in your trunk. In your wheel barrow. All the way through the house. . . . See if you had anything hid.” Welfare agents often enlisted the help of residents willing to spy on their neighbors in exchange for a larger grocery order or a few more pounds of coal.³⁶

But hiding groceries, livestock, and personal items from relief authorities was necessary for survival. Black Party leaders, most of whom were on the relief rolls themselves, understood the importance of this tactic in the black community. Communist-led “vigilance committees” were created to visit suspected “stool pigeons” and strongly advised them to cease their activities. If this tactic failed, Hosea Hudson recalls, “we start to bombard them with postcards.” This practice characterized most radical opposition in Birmingham. Dramatic marches popularized the struggle for relief and no doubt applied some pressure on welfare authorities to provide meaningful assistance to the poor, but more individualized forms of resistance, or “oppositional practices,” proved to be effective weapons of the weak

in everyday life. Local Communists sustained this individualized tradition in a collective setting by defending the community's right to hide food and personal items—they confronted not the welfare agent but the collaborator.³⁷

The Party's fight against inadequate relief measures and expanding unemployment brought a few hundred workers into its ever-widening circle, but there were other critical areas for rank-and-file involvement that had nothing to do with obtaining food. The Communist-led ILD attracted national attention for its defense of nine young black men accused of raping two white women near Paint Rock, Alabama, in March 1931. The campaign to free the “Scottsboro Boys” boosted Party popularity in Birmingham's black communities almost overnight. About the same time, Communists began organizing a union of black sharecroppers and poor farmers in the eastern piedmont counties of rural Alabama. The union's involvement in a gun battle with police in Tallapoosa County contributed immensely to the Alabama Party's national reputation. As these activities became front page news, ordinary black workers skeptical of white radical promises began to take a second look at the Communist Party, the ILD, and the neighborhood relief committees.³⁸

The Scottsboro campaign and the unemployed movement attracted precisely the kind of local leaders that were needed to strengthen the Party's ties with the black community. Al Murphy, who proved to be an exceptionally adept organizer, joined the CP and the YCL in 1930. Born in 1908 to poor sharecropping parents in McRae, Georgia, Murphy was raised for the most part by his grandparents after his father died, although his mother continued to support him on meager earnings from domestic work and cotton picking. He grew up in a strongly religious and race conscious household; his grandfather, an African Methodist Episcopal minister, had been a presiding elder under Bishop Henry McNeil Turner, a nationally prominent advocate of black emigration to Africa, and his grandmother also became “a self-made Methodist minister.” As a teenager he moved in with his aunt and uncle in Tuscaloosa and made his living digging ditches, picking cotton, unloading coal, and working in a pipe foundry handling dangerous, corrosive chemicals. In 1923 Murphy moved to Birmingham only to find more back-breaking labor and low wages. This life did not squash his longterm aspirations, however. He enrolled in night school to continue his education (which had come to an abrupt halt in the fourth grade) so that he could pursue a career as a public speaker and carve a niche for himself in the limited area of Negro politics. When the depression hit Birmingham, he recalled, “I had to stop night school and join workers on the bread lines.” Then one autumn Sunday morning in 1930 he noticed a leaflet which read:

“Stop Lynching—Full Rights for the Negro People—Down With Imperialist War!” Shortly thereafter, Frank Williams, his friend and recent Communist recruit, escorted Murphy to a local unemployed meeting that so impressed him he joined that night. Murphy subsequently immersed himself in Party work, attending Marxist education classes regularly and recruiting black steel workers at the Stockham plant in Birmingham on behalf of the TUUL.³⁹



Al Murphy, photographed in 1977 (courtesy Southern Historical Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill)

Among those Murphy recruited from the Stockham plant was Hosea Hudson, a fellow iron worker born in Wilkes County, Georgia, in 1898 whose early life resembled Murphy's in many ways. Hudson, too, grew up in an extended family consisting of his mother, brother, and grandmother in rural Georgia. After his mother remarried in 1913 and left the family, fifteen-year-old Hosea took up sharecropping to support his remaining family members. He married in 1917 and continued sharecropping nearly debt free until the boll weevil wiped out his crop in 1921. Failing to secure steady employment in Atlanta in 1923, Hudson and his family moved to Birmingham where he found work as an iron molder at the Stockham foundry. Like Murphy and Angelo Herndon, Hudson had no trade union experience before the

1930s but possessed a strong personal intolerance for racial injustice. And also like Murphy, Hudson was the ideological product of elders who lived through the revolutionary times of Reconstruction: “I always did resent injustice and the way they used to treat Negroes,” he recalls. “My grandmother used to talk about these things. She was very militant herself, you know.” Hudson tried to organize fellow employees independently in the late 1920s, but when members could not agree on the organization's purpose and direction, he abandoned the idea. After having ignored the CP in Birmingham for over a year, Hudson's interest in Communism was suddenly piqued by the Scottsboro case. Sympathetic to the defendants and the efforts of the ILD, Hudson enthusiastically accepted Murphy's cautious invitation to explore what the Party had to offer, and at a meeting in September 1931, he and everyone else in attendance opted to join the Communist Party.⁴⁰ Through the efforts of individuals such as Hudson and Murphy, the circle widened to include Andy Brown, Joe Howard, Saul Davis, John and David James, Mack Coad, Henry O. Mayfield, John Beidel, and other stalwarts who later became respected Party organizers and labor leaders. All of these individuals had Southern rural roots, limited education, and were unskilled or semiskilled laborers in Birmingham's coal and steel industry. They were all very active in their respective churches and some, particularly Hudson, Beidel, and Mayfield, participated in local gospel quartets.⁴¹

The higher echelons of Party leadership also underwent significant changes during this period. In 1931, district organizer Tom Johnson left Alabama for health reasons, and Harry Jackson stepped in to take his place. Based mainly in Chattanooga, Jackson spent much of his time traveling from place to place overseeing local Party work. But early in 1932, District 17 was reconstructed under the leadership of Nat Ross and Ted Wellman. Unlike Johnson and Jackson, Ross and Wellman were intellectuals in the formal sense of the word. The New York-born Wellman, who adopted the name “Sid Benson” during his tenure in Birmingham, was remembered by a sympathetic Alabamian professor for his “Marxian interpretation of a Haydn symphony.” Born of Russian Jewish background and a graduate of Columbia University, Nat Ross had briefly attended Harvard Law School and initiated work toward a doctorate at Columbia before joining the Party in 1929. After working as an organizer in southern Illinois for a while, he was sent to Birmingham.⁴² A rigid theoretician, Ross restructured the Party according to Leninist principles of organization—unbending discipline and regular meetings were the order of the day.



Hosea Hudson, photographed in 1986 (photograph by author)

Unlike the black women who rose to crucial middle-level leadership positions, white women Communists for the most part were relegated to mimeograph machines and occasional public speaking. Soon after joining the Communist Party in Chicago, Alice Burke followed her husband Donald Burke to Birmingham where he had been appointed regional secretary of the ILD. Arriving in the spring of 1932, she was described as a local Party leader in press reports, but in reality she had no role in the district committee and was practically excluded from decision making. "I was just a wife," she recalls, "and I went where the husband was assigned to. . . . I had no role at all, except as a rank and file 'Jimmy Higgins' worker." Nevertheless, she made tremendous sacrifices for the Party that were hardly acknowledged. For instance, although Burke was arrested along with Wirt Taylor in November 1932 and served eight weeks in a Birmingham jail, she was not mentioned in Communist press reports that detail Taylor's heroic struggle for freedom. But perhaps her biggest sacrifice occurred when she had to send her newborn daughter to California for three years to live with her sister because of the dangers Birmingham Communists faced daily.⁴³

White women rarely challenged their designated roles within the Party during the early 1930s, but there were some who ignored conventions, both within Communist circles and society as a whole, and in some ways exhibited an incipient feminist consciousness. Two leading Southern-born female iconoclasts in the Party, Mary Leonard and Jane Speed, ironically were products of two different social worlds. Mary Leonard, born and raised of working-class background and the widow of a local druggist, carved out her own leadership position through her powerful speaking ability and by building a small base of support among poor white housewives. The heavyset and outspoken Leonard, whose confrontational and cavalier attitude toward police and government officials often made her comrades

nervous, was also remembered for her unconventional private life. "I don't think she was married," Alice Burke recalled, "but she'd date other people. I would say she was too forward."⁴⁴ Jane Speed, on the other hand, described in the *Daily Worker* as "a handsome auburn haired girl with an appearance so demure you'd never guess the militant struggles in which she has taken part," was known to be far more discreet privately and less threatening to her male comrades. She was immediately accepted within leadership circles because "she had the presentation of an educated person," an important attribute in a Marxist organization comprised largely of illiterate and semiliterate working people. Born to a very wealthy Southern family, Jane and her mother, Mary Martin Craik Speed (known affectionately as "Dolly"), became active in left-wing circles while Jane was a student in Vienna, Austria, in the late 1920s. After returning to Alabama in 1931, the twenty-one-year-old nouveau radical devoted her energy to the American CP, organizing black and white unemployed in the streets of Birmingham and daily challenging her designation as a "Southern belle."⁴⁵

In light of the anti-Semitism, xenophobia, and discrimination many European immigrants experienced upon their arrival in Birmingham, Communists might have expected substantial support from the city's Italian, Jewish, Greek, and Slavic populations. During the 1920s Italians and Jews were victims of Klan attacks, and some Bulgarian and Greek coal miners earned less than blacks during the early part of the century. Moreover, the Russian Jewish emigres who brought to America (particularly New York) radical traditions incubated by the 1905 revolution were conspicuously silent in Birmingham. While discrimination and ghettoization sometimes contributed to ethnic radicalization in other urban areas, Birmingham was unique in that these ethnic groups had greater opportunities for upward social mobility. Italians, for instance, moved into family-owned groceries with relative ease, tapping a black working-class consumer market anxious to escape company commissaries. By the 1930s Italians operated some three hundred grocery stores in the Birmingham area. Jews, too, climbed the economic ladder rather swiftly, although they were denied access to the mainstream bourgeoisie's social institutions and thus remained sort of a pariah middle class. Equally important is the fact that racist and anti-Communist propaganda hindered potential Jewish support because their well-being and continued upward mobility often depended on their willingness to distance themselves from blacks, and the anti-Semitic overtones of Southern red-baiting forced the Jewish community to reject radicalism in any form as an act of self-preservation.⁴⁶

The few Southern whites who entered the Communist rank-and-file

during this period, if for only a fleeting moment, were usually unemployed industrial workers from the Birmingham district and coal miners and poor farmers from northern Alabama who had a tradition of voting Republican, Populist, and Socialist. In fact, about one-fifth of the Communist vote in 1932 came from northern counties. Many of these supporters, especially the poor upcountry farmers, had little tolerance for African-Americans and exhibited a kind of populist, class-oriented view of their problems. Their opposition to the planter class and the “Big Mules,” combined with the crises created by the depression, momentarily outweighed their racism.⁴⁷ In fact, several white recruits were reportedly former KKK members. These Klansmen gone Red, along with other Southern whites who exhibited racial prejudice, grudgingly conceded that blacks had to be organized in order to improve their own conditions. As a white Birmingham steel worker succinctly put it at a Party unit meeting in 1931, “We got to get together and organize the niggahs and whites into one strong general union.”⁴⁸

The Party's primary focus on African-Americans, for the most part, alienated native white sympathizers. A former member of the Socialist party who joined the Communists in 1930 argued that if the Party concentrated exclusively on whites, “they would carry the whole South” in the elections. This was not just a tactical suggestion, however. After the proletarian revolution, he explained, black people “would have to be disciplined for 50 years, since the Negro has just emerged from serfdom.”⁴⁹ Needless to say, the author of this letter was summarily expelled.

As an organization militantly antiracist and consciously interracial, the Party initially rejected or expelled whites who exhibited racial prejudice. By 1932, Nat Ross was highly critical of this policy. The most important reason for the Party's failure among whites, Ross argued, was its refusal to “accept in our mass organization white workers who still had traces of race prejudice.” Ross believed that joint action between blacks and whites would illustrate to white workers the merits of interracial unity and in the process, “break the prejudice of the Southern white workers.” But the policy was not very successful, for as Clyde Johnson recalled, when Ross and Ted Wellman assigned white Southerners to direct a unit in a black neighborhood, these white organizers were usually ostracized by their friends and neighbors, thus forcing them to choose between the Party and continued social acceptance within their own communities.⁵⁰

Southern whites were not only expected to change their lives and attitudes practically overnight, but Northern Communists' condescending and sometimes insensitive attitude toward Southerners

probably contributed to their high turnover. At a district committee meeting, for example, Tom Johnson warned those in attendance not to “forget that the workers from the South are backward and we must not be too harsh in our dealings with them.” And more than one local organizer cringed upon reading James Allen's ahistorical passage: “Gone are the days of silence. The weary backs of the southern masses no longer bend meekly. . . . New on the fighting front, they have not yet advanced to the organizational stage of Northern labor.”⁵¹

On the other hand, few white Alabamians even entertained the idea of becoming Communists. Anti-Communist propaganda, rooted in popular myths and indisputably couched in the language of race, proved a mighty deterrent to Southern white support for the CP. “Social equality” was such a potent, all-encompassing anti-Communist slogan that the Party's demand for black self-determination, with its separatist implication, was surprisingly ignored in the Southern press or in the various forms of Southern anti-Communist propaganda. The cry of social equality, with all its multiple (specifically sexual) meanings and apparent ambiguities, was particularly effective because it symbolized the ultimate threat to white supremacy, class power, civilization, and Southern rulers' most precious property—white women. Headlines appeared in Birmingham's newspapers that read, “Communists Tell Negroes to Force Social Equality throughout the South” or “Negroes Are Urged to Get Social Equality.” Leaders of the Birmingham Trades and Labor Council responded similarly, using the local labor press to wage an all-out war against Communism. The *Labor Advocate* labeled Communists agitators from Moscow who “openly preach social equality for the Black race. . . . Any man who seeks to disturb the relations between the races is a dangerous character, and should be squelched NOW.”⁵²

The Fish Committee hearings held in 1930 provide a window into the dominant beliefs many white Birmingham residents held with respect to Communism. Everyone who testified at the Birmingham hearing agreed that the quintessential crime perpetrated by the Reds was the stirring up of race antagonisms. Witnesses argued forcefully that the doctrine of Communism was tantamount to social equality and that its perpetrators were all foreign-born Jews exploiting black ignorance. In their quest to prove the conspiratorial nature of the Communist Party in Birmingham, much of the testimony bordered on the absurd. Klansman John G. Murphy claimed Ohio-born Communist Angelo Herndon was “half Chinese and half Negro,” and state investigator Achmed Mundo testified that Frank Burns's real name was “Shan Ti Eng,” a direct descendant of “a man by the name of Eng [who] was one of a group of 21 headed by Leon Trotsky.” Mundo further concurred with others that the Party had planned a violent

insurrection in Birmingham and, with their unlimited funds, had purchased the necessary hardware:

The CHAIRMAN: You say the Communist party had shipped tear gas bombs?

Mr. MUNDO: Yes, sir.

The CHAIRMAN: What makes you believe that?

Mr. MUNDO: A shipment was received here by one of the express companies, about the last of August, and it was labeled "Tear-gas bombs," and came from one of the dealers in obsolete Government supplies in Washington.⁵³

The popular perception of Communists as "foreigners" and "nigger lovers" whose sole purpose was to wage a race war in the South created a huge barrier between these Northern white idealists and Alabama's white working-class communities. No matter how many white Southerners agreed with the Party's program, the Reds were still outsiders who had no roots among white Alabamians. Herein lies a strange irony: The Central Committee dispatched white Communists from the North to organize working people in a highly segregated environment, but because the movement attracted overwhelming numbers of black working people, it was virtually impossible to develop and sustain close contacts with their constituency. Southern whites, with whom they could more easily meet because they shared the same social space and faced fewer legal hurdles, rejected and even attacked the Communist Party. Members of Birmingham's white cadre were essentially social pariahs in the white community, yet social and legal sanctions hampered personal relations with their black comrades. Thus two separate parties were formed—a large, broad-based organization of Southern blacks and a tiny cadre of Northern whites, supported by a few local people—which met together occasionally in secret hideaways or in streets and parks during open demonstrations.

As the harsh winter of 1931–32 gave way to spring, it became increasingly clear that the Party's future was directly tied to black working people, particularly the unemployed. In May, Hosea Hudson, Joe Howard, and Andy Brown led a mass march of some 200 dissatisfied black relief workers who had been forced by local social workers to perform laborious road work in exchange for relief. Between 125 and 150 showed up for the three-mile march, but toward

the end their numbers began to dwindle and only about 50 marchers arrived on the steps of city hall. An elected committee of 6, headed by black YCL leader Joe Burton, was intercepted by police when they tried to meet with city commissioner Jimmie Jones. The crowd eventually dispersed after Burton was knocked down by several officers and guns were drawn on the crowd. Bloodied and staggering, Burton declared the Communists would return, next time with larger numbers.⁵⁴

Several months later, local Communists made good on Burton's promise. The November 7 demonstration was the largest Communist-led demonstration in Alabama's history, attracting an overwhelmingly black crowd of five to seven thousand. As people gathered outside the Jefferson County courthouse, Wirt Taylor, a white Birmingham-born Communist, and Alice Burke were carted away by police. The arrests failed to dampen the enthusiasm of the growing crowd, which was dominated by a vocal group of black women carrying baskets, bags, and the belief that food would be distributed to the protesters. Mary Leonard led an interracial delegation to meet with Jimmie Jones and present the unemployed councils' demands for food and cash relief and unrestricted voting rights for all citizens. Jones, who was surrounded by police officers, ignored the delegation's demands and merely questioned Leonard as to whether or not she believed in social equality. When she replied that blacks were "just as good as you and I," Jones asked the group to leave, and the police began to disperse the crowd outside.⁵⁵

Three weeks later crowds once again gathered in front of the courthouse steps to demonstrate against starvation and unemployment. Under the auspices of the National Committee of Unemployed Councils, "several thousand Negro and white workers," according to Party sources, attended a meeting to greet "column 6" of the National Hunger Marchers who had left from New Orleans en route to the national demonstration in Washington, D.C. Following a brief outbreak of violence between police and demonstrators, keynote speaker Alice Mosley, a young black Communist organizer from the industrial suburb of Greenwood, was arrested along with two unidentified black men who were in the audience.⁵⁶

These mass demonstrations also coincided with the Party's election campaign. For the first time in their history the Communists were able to register with Jefferson County and state registrars and have their candidates officially placed on the ballot. In addition to campaigning on behalf of the Party's presidential candidates, William Z. Foster and his running mate, James Ford, the Birmingham cadre put up their own congressional candidates. The two Communist candidates were Lee

Parsons, a black worker who ran for Birmingham's Ninth Congressional District seat, and Andrew Forsman, a veteran white radical who made a bid for the Senate. A pioneer organizer for the Knights of Labor, Forsman had run for senator a decade earlier on the Socialist ticket and for a brief moment had served as the president of the Mobile Trades Council. While Parsons's candidacy was probably looked upon with great interest by the mass of disfranchised blacks, the Party's vice-presidential candidate, James Ford, probably had even greater appeal since he was also a native of Alabama and a former steel worker who had earned a degree from Fisk University.⁵⁷

Obtaining votes, however, was clearly not the objective of the campaign. Voting, one leaflet explained, would not lead to workers' empowerment; that could only come through the direct seizure of factories, mines, and warehouses and self-determination for African-Americans in the black belt. Calling for working-class unity across racial lines, the Party's campaign focused mainly on the plight of Southern blacks, who were "treated just like dogs by the bosses." While the platform demanded self-determination in the black belt, the central thrust was black-white unity: "It is clear there is only one way out of hunger and death and that is to break down the walls of segregation, Jim-Crowism and lynching by a united front of all poor people, white and colored, against the bosses and landlords, for bread and freedom."⁵⁸

In October Birmingham's radicals hosted a Communist campaign meeting to be addressed by none other than William Z. Foster. Some leading white citizens regarded Foster's appearance as an indication that Birmingham was becoming a target for a Communist takeover. City commissioner Jimmie Jones tried to comfort one concerned citizen who feared the consequences of Foster's presence by assuring that if the Communist leader "makes any remarks that are in violation of the law, he will be arrested while in Birmingham." The Klan sent Foster a chilling warning in the form of a brief telegram stating, "YOUR PRESENCE IN BIRMINGHAM ALABAMA SUNDAY OCTOBER 9TH IS NOT WANTED. SEND NIGGER FORD."⁵⁹

By the time the telegram arrived, however, Foster had already postponed his campaign tour because of illness. Clarence Hathaway, then the editor of the *Daily Worker* and secretary of the National Communist Election Campaign Committee, continued Foster's whirlwind tour of the South, speaking in Tennessee, Georgia, Louisiana, Kentucky, and Florida. Scheduled to address a Birmingham meeting on October 9, Hathaway was detained by the police in New Orleans the night before and never appeared. Unaware of Hathaway's arrest, the meeting went on as planned, drawing some twelve hundred

people to the Lyric Theater, a popular local black theater in North Birmingham. There were a few sympathetic whites in the audience, but the majority were hecklers attempting to disrupt the meeting. Despite Hathaway's failure to appear, the meeting went rather smoothly after Fred Keith mounted the podium and gave an impromptu speech about the election campaign, the unemployed movement, and the Scottsboro case. The meeting ended abruptly, however, after a group of Klansmen in the audience set off a smoke bomb in the hall.⁶⁰

When the votes were counted the Foster-Ford ticket polled a surprising 726 votes—a significant number considering that its main constituency (black workers) were disfranchised. Most of the votes, however, were from counties where the Share Croppers' Union was active and from northern Alabama, where the Party was slowly building a following among poor white farmers. Jefferson County only polled 33 Communist votes in the presidential race, although Lee Parsons culled 133 votes from Birmingham's electorate in his bid for Congress.⁶¹

Once the electoral campaign ended, the devastating winter of 1932–33 created a new set of problems. The relief rolls grew tremendously, and by 1933, twenty-six thousand blacks—nearly 27 percent of Birmingham's total black population—were receiving welfare.⁶² Stepping up its fight for relief in and around Birmingham, the Party planned a mass unemployed demonstration on May 1 in recognition of International Workingmen's Day. Focusing on the failure of municipal and private relief efforts, the Party not only demanded more meaningful assistance but vowed to “stop the insults of the Red Cross when we go for our relief checks.” There was a sense of irony in their final plea for full freedom of speech and assembly since the city commission decided to revoke their parade permit at the last minute. The illegality of the gathering and police warnings did not deter the nearly three thousand people who showed up at Ingram Park. The demonstrators were met by police officers, White Legionnaires, and Klansmen who forced them out of the park and onto the sidewalk. Jane Speed, who had been standing amidst a sea of black women, stepped up on the bumper of a car and began to address the crowd before police quickly arrested her. As she was whisked away in a patrol car, Speed dramatically screamed to the cordon of black participants, “Fellow workers, this is the way they do us.” What began as a shoving match with police deteriorated to an all-out street fight. Police officers on the scene attacked the crowd with pistols drawn, but they were ordered not to use them. When one officer shoved his gun into the body of a black woman, she shouted, “Shoot me and you shoot a thousand more.” At a Party meeting the very next

day, a group of black women excitedly inquired as to the time and place of the next demonstration “because they wanted to whip them a cop.”⁶³

The May Day battle was not the Communists’ last confrontation with police in the streets of Birmingham, but over the next few months the Party's priorities began to shift from helping the jobless to organizing the unorganized. With the enactment of the FERA in May 1933 (which meant a congressional appropriation of over nine million dollars for emergency relief for Alabama) and the creation of the CWA that same winter, thousands were lifted from the relief rolls. But more importantly, because the NIRA facilitated the reorganization of the labor movement, Birmingham Communists turned increasingly to their original goal of organizing industrial workers.⁶⁴

The unemployed campaign was the key to the Party's growth and consolidation in Birmingham; by the end of 1933, the Party's dues-paying membership in Birmingham rose to nearly five hundred, and its mass organizations encompassed possibly twice that number.⁶⁵ The relief campaign was crucial to the formation of a local cadre, serving especially to increase the number of black female members, who often proved more militant than their male comrades. Furthermore, the various tactics developed in the relief campaign, from open confrontation to hidden forms of resistance, would later prove invaluable to local Communists continuing their work in the mines, mills, and plantations of the black belt.

Chapter Two: In Egyptland

The Share Croppers' Union

“Fifty cents a day Lord for working in the field
just four bits Lord for a good strong hand
from dawn to dark Lord from can till can't
ain't no way Lord a man can come out.
They's got to be a way Lord show us the way. . . .”
And then they sang.

“Go Down Moses” was the song they sang
“Go down Moses, way down in Egyptland. . . .”

—John Beecher

The rural world Communist organizers entered in 1930–31 made the poverty-stricken streets of Birmingham look like a paradise. Cotton farmers were in the midst of a crisis at least a decade old. After World War I, cotton prices plummeted, forcing planters to reduce acreage despite rising debts, and the boll weevil destroyed large stretches of the crop. When the stock market collapsed and cotton prices reached an all-time low, the real victims were small landholders who were forced into tenancy and tenants whose material well-being deteriorated even further.¹ It is no coincidence, therefore, that black farmers straddling the line between tenancy and ownership formed the nucleus of Alabama's Communist-led rural movement.

Within the limited world of cotton culture existed a variety of production relations. Cash tenants, more often white than black, usually leased land for several years at a time, supplied their own implements, draft animals, seed, feed, and fertilizer, and farmed without supervision. Share tenants, on the other hand, might own some draft animals and planting materials, but the landowner provided any additional equipment, shelter, and if necessary, advances of cash, food, or other subsistence goods such as clothing. Verbal contracts were made annually and the landowner generally marketed the crop, giving the tenant between three-fourths and two-thirds of the price, minus any advances or previous debts. The most common form of tenancy in the South was sharecropping. Virtually property less workers paid with a portion of the crops raised,

sharecroppers had little choice but to cultivate cotton—the landowner's choice of staple crops. The landowner supplied the acreage, houses, draft animals, planting materials, and nearly all subsistence necessities, including food and cash advances. These “furnishings” were then deducted from the sharecropper's portion of the crop at an incredibly high interest rate. The system not only kept most tenants in debt, but it perpetuated living conditions that bordered on intolerable. Landowners furnished entire families with poorly constructed one- or two-room shacks, usually without running water or adequate sanitary facilities. Living day-to-day on a diet of “fat back,” beans, molasses, and cornbread, most Southern tenants suffered from nutritional deficiencies—pellagra and rickets were particularly common diseases in the black belt.²



Sharecropping family, near Eutaw, Alabama (photograph by Dorothea Lange, Farm Security Administration, courtesy Library of Congress)

The gradations of tenancy must be understood in relation to both race and the geographic distribution of cotton production. The black belt, the throne of King Cotton in Alabama, with its rich, black, calcareous clay soil, still resembled its antebellum past in that blacks outnumbered whites four to one in some counties in 1930.³ As with other cotton growing areas, the plant's life cycle and seasonal needs determined the labor and living patterns of those who worked the land. In early spring, after the land had thawed and dried from winter, cotton farmers plowed and fertilized rows in preparation for planting, which followed several weeks later. When the young plants began to sprout, the cotton had to be “chopped”—grass and weeds were removed and the stalks separated so that they did not grow too close together. If this was not done regularly the crop could be lost. Picking time, the most intense period of labor involving all family members, began around September 1 and continued through October. Once the cotton had been picked, ginned, baled, and sold, accounts were settled

between the tenant and the landowner. The tenants, who usually found themselves empty-handed after settling accounts, cultivated gardens to survive the winter, begged for food and cash advances, or spent several days without anything to eat. And throughout the entire year, particularly during the lean winters, tenants hauled firewood, cut hay, repaired their homes, fences, tools, and watering holes, cared for their stock, cleared trees, and removed stalks from the previous harvest.⁴

Women's lives were especially hard in the world of cotton culture. Rising before dawn and the rest of family, the wives and daughters of tenant farmers prepared meals over a wood stove or open fire; fetched water from distant wells or springs; washed laundry by hand in pots of boiling water; toted firewood; tended livestock; made preserves, dyes, clothes, and medicinal remedies; ground corn meal; gathered eggs; and tried to keep a house that generally lacked screens, windows, indoor plumbing, and electricity tidy. Women also worked in the fields, especially during picking and chopping time, and in the midst of physically exacting labor they bore and raised children. Many had little choice but to take in laundry or perform domestic work for meager wages, thus tripling their work load. Women choppers and pickers generally earned half as much as their male co-workers. To make matters worse, because husbands and elder sons occasionally migrated to nearby cities or mines to find work, escape family responsibilities, or avoid persecution in one form or another, many women and children in a variety of female-headed households and extended families were left to organize production without the benefit of adult male labor.⁵

It was not unusual for a black woman to manage household finances and negotiate the year-end settlements with her landlord. On some plantations the woman's role as spokesperson was a defensive measure. When a black man appeared to settle his debts, the landlord's wife sometimes negotiated in her husband's place so that if the sharecropper objected to the final agreement, the landlord could accuse him of "insulting a white woman." The presence of the sharecropper's wife or eldest daughter in his place mitigated the landlord's ability to construe the dialogue as a violation of white womanhood.⁶ Black women were also more likely to be literate and have more formal education than black men. According to the 1940 Census, more black women than black men obtained formal education beyond five to six years. In the black belt counties where the illiteracy rate among African-Americans was as high as 35 and 40 percent in 1940, the ability to read and write could determine a sharecropper's success or failure. In several cases, women proved so important as managers that in some families their unexpected death or illness

meant total ruin of an already precarious financial situation. "As long as mother lived," recalled a member of the Share Croppers' Union in Tallapoosa County, "she managed some way and kept us in school, but the boss took everything away from father until he would be so worried he would not know what to do."⁷

It is tempting to characterize the black belt as a timeless, static, semifeudal remnant of the post-Reconstruction era, but such an idyllic picture ignores the history of rural opposition and does not take into account significant structural changes that have occurred since the 1890s. Black and white populists waged a losing battle against the expansion of tenancy, and in the wake of defeat, many landless farmers resisted debt peonage with their feet. Drowning in a sea of debt, tenants often broke their contracts, leaving an unsuspecting landowner at a critical moment in the planting cycle. Given the demography of the plantation, open collective rebellion was virtually impossible. Shacks were placed near the edge of the plantation, and two or three miles often separated tenant families from one another. Therefore, more individualized forms of resistance (theft, arson, sabotage, "foot dragging," slander, and occasional outbreaks of personal violence) were used effectively to wrest small material gains or to retaliate against unfair landlords. Such tactics were legitimated by folk cultures that celebrated evasive and cunning activities and, ironically, by the dominant ideology of racist paternalism that constructed an image of blacks as naturally ignorant, childlike, shiftless laborers with a strong penchant for theft.⁸

Resistance, in some ways, altered the structure of production as well as the planters' ability to make a profit. With the onset of World War I, for example, large numbers of workers left the countryside altogether to take advantage of employment opportunities in the sprawling urban centers of the North and South. Areas most affected by the exodus were forced to adopt limited forms of mechanization to make up for the dwindling labor force and rising wages. The movement off the land was accompanied by improved roads and the availability of affordable automobiles, which increased rural mobility. The number of automobiles owned and operated by Alabama farmers increased from 16,592 in 1920 to 73,634 in 1930. Small holders and tenants who acquired vehicles were no longer beholden to the plantation commissary and could now purchase supplies at much lower prices in the nearby urban centers. The revolution in transportation compelled landowners to furnish tenants in cash in lieu of credit lines at plantation commissaries and county stores in an attempt to retain rural labor in the face of competitive wages offered in the cities. But after 1929, cash was a rare commodity, and landowners resurrected the commissary system, effectively

undermining their tenants' newly acquired freedom and mobility.⁹

By the time Birmingham Communists established links to the cotton belt early in 1931, tenancy seemed on the verge of collapse. Advances of food and cash were cut off, debts were piling higher, and the city offered fewer opportunities to escape rural poverty. Subterranean forms of resistance were by no means abandoned, but groups of black farmers now saw the logic in the CP's call for collective action.

The slogan demanding self-determination in the black belt did not inspire Birmingham's nascent Communist cadre to initiate a rural-based radical movement. The 1930 "Draft Program for Negro Farmers in the Southern States" expressed the Central Committee's doubt as to the ability of black sharecroppers and tenants to create an autonomous radical movement, and a few months later James Allen, editor of the *Southern Worker*, argued that only industrial workers were capable of leading tenants and sharecroppers because the latter lacked the collective experience of industrial labor. Aside from spouting rhetorical slogans, Party organizers all but ignored the black belt during their first year in Birmingham. Indeed, their first taste of rural organizing was in northern Alabama among a small group of white tenant farmers who had asked the TUUL for help obtaining government relief.¹⁰

Then, in January 1931, an uprising of some five hundred sharecroppers in England, Arkansas, compelled Southern Communists to take the rural poor more seriously. Birmingham Party leaders immediately issued a statement exhorting Alabama farmers to follow the Arkansas example: "Call mass meetings in each township and on each large plantation. Set up farmers Relief Councils at these meetings. Organize hunger marches on the towns to demand food and clothing from the supply merchants and bankers who have sucked you dry year after year. . . . Join hands with the unemployed workers of the towns and with their organizations which are fighting the same battle for bread."¹¹

The response was startling. The *Southern Worker* was flooded with letters from poor black Alabama farmers. A sharecropper from Waverly, Alabama, requested "full information on this Fight Against Starvation," and pledged to "do like the Arkansas farmers" with the assistance of Communist organizers. A Shelby County tenant made a similar request: "We farmers in Vincent wish to know more about the Communist Party, an organization that fights for all farmers. And also to learn us how to fight for better conditions." Another "farmer correspondent" had already made plans to "get a bunch together for a meeting," adding that poor farmers in his community were "mighty close to the breaking point."¹²

In February Angelo Herndon was sent to Wilcox County to address a group of sharecroppers who had begun meeting regularly under the leadership of a local black minister. Sensing the group's distress, he elected to stay longer than intended and began organizing a union under the auspices of the United Farmers' League. But once authorities learned of his activities, he was forced to flee the county.¹³

Despite Herndon's experience, district leadership enthusiastically laid plans for a sharecroppers' and farm workers' union that would conceivably unite poor white farmers of northern Alabama and black tenants and sharecroppers in the black belt. An attempt to bring black and white farmers together in a joint conference, however, brought few results. The Party's position on social equality and equal rights alienated most poor white farmers, and within a few months the Party's white contacts in Cullman and St. Clair counties had practically dissipated.¹⁴

The CFWU was eventually launched in Tallapoosa County, a section of the eastern piedmont whose varied topography ranges from the hill country of Appalachia in the north to the coastal-like plains and pine forests of the south. In 1930, almost 70 percent of those engaged in agriculture were either tenants or wage workers, the majority of whom were sharecroppers. Blacks comprised the bulk of the county's tenant and rural laboring population, and while they constituted roughly one-third of the total population, most blacks resided in the flat, fertile southeastern and southwestern sections of the county. As in the black belt counties further south, antebellum planter families in these two areas retained political and economic ascendancy, despite competition from textile and sawmill interests. Not surprisingly, the impetus to build a union came from local tenant farmers living primarily in southeastern Tallapoosa County. Estelle Milner, a young school teacher and the daughter of a black Tallapoosa sharecropper, was instrumental in establishing links between black farmers and Communist leaders in Birmingham. She laid the groundwork for the Party's activities by secretly distributing the *Southern Worker* and placing leaflets in strategic areas. Two brothers, Tommy and Ralph Gray, contacted the Party, persuaded several local sharecroppers to send letters to the *Southern Worker*, and in early spring invited a Communist organizer to help them build a union.¹⁵

The Grays were known by their neighbors as a proud family with a militant heritage. Their grandfather Alfred Gray had been a state legislator in Perry County, Alabama, during Reconstruction and a staunch advocate of equal rights as well as a sharp critic of the Freedmen's Bureau. He told a mixed crowd in Uniontown in 1868, "I am not afraid to fight for [the Constitution], and I will fight for it until

hell freezes over. ... I may go to hell, my home is hell, but the white man shall go there with me.”¹⁶ Ralph Gray, who had been nourished on stories of his grandfather, emerged as the fledgling movement's undisputed local leader. One of fifteen children, Gray was born in Tallapoosa County in 1873 and spent about one year of his adult life working in Birmingham. After returning to Tallapoosa in 1895, he married and settled down as a tenant farmer until 1919, when he and his family left Alabama in search of better opportunities. Having spent some time sharecropping in Oklahoma and New Mexico, he returned to the place of his birth in 1929 and purchased a small farm. Gray owned a plot of land but it was hardly enough to survive on. Nevertheless, he managed to remain debt-free and purchased his own automobile, thus earning the respect of his local community. Early in 1931 Gray applied for a low-interest federal loan with which to rent a farm from Tallapoosa merchant John J. Langley. Because the loan check required a double endorsement, Langley was able to cash the check and withhold Gray's portion, who then retaliated by filing a complaint with the Agricultural Extension Service. “When the landlord heard what he had done,” his brother Tommy recalled, “he got mighty mad and jumped on Brother Ralph to give him a whipping. Instead Brother Ralph whipped him.” Soon thereafter, Ralph began reading the *Southern Worker*, joined the Communist Party, and set out with his brother to build a union.¹⁷

Gray's fight with Langley suggests a growing tension between landlord and tenant, merchant and landowner, each operating in a system more precarious than ever. As conditions deteriorated, the *Southern Worker's* appeal for collective action became an increasingly attractive alternative to starvation and isolated instances of protest. In April, the Grays' request for an organizer was filled by Mack Coad, an illiterate Birmingham steel worker originally from Charleston, South Carolina, who had joined the Party in 1930. Following an unsuccessful bid for municipal judge in Chattanooga under the Communist ticket, he returned to Birmingham in March 1931 for a three- or four-week hiatus and then left for Tallapoosa County as “Jim Wright,” secretary of the CFWU.¹⁸

Coad arrived at the height of an important crisis in rural Tallapoosa. Soon after the cotton had been planted and chopped, several landlords withdrew all cash and food advances in a calculated effort to generate labor for the newly built Russell Saw Mill. The mill paid exactly the same wage for unskilled labor as the going rate for cotton chopping—fifty cents per day for men and twenty-five cents a day for women. By mid-May the *Southern Worker* reported significant union gains in Tallapoosa County and announced that black sawmill workers and farmers in the vicinity “have enthusiastically welcomed

Communist leadership.” The nascent movement formulated seven basic demands, the most crucial being the continuation of food advances. The right of sharecroppers to market their own crops was also a critical issue because landlords usually gave their tenants the year's lowest price for their cotton and held on to the bales until the price increased, thus denying the producer the full benefits of the crop. Union leaders also demanded small gardens for resident wage hands, cash rather than wages in kind, a minimum wage of one dollar per day, and a three-hour midday rest for all laborers—all of which were to be applied equally, irrespective of race, age, or sex. Furthermore, they agitated for a nine-month school year for black children and free transportation to and from school.¹⁹

By July 1931 the CFWU, now eight hundred strong, had won a few isolated victories in its battle for the continuation of food advances.²⁰ Most Tallapoosa landlords, however, just would not tolerate a surreptitious organization of black tenant farmers and agricultural workers. Camp Hill, Alabama, became the scene of the union's first major confrontation with the local power structure. On July 15, Taft Holmes organized a group of sharecroppers near Camp Hill and invited Coad, along with several other union members, to address the group in a vacant house that doubled as a church. In all, about eighty black men and women piled into the abandoned house to listen to Coad discuss the CFWU and the Scottsboro case. After a black informant notified Tallapoosa County sheriff Kyle Young of the gathering, deputized vigilantes raided the meeting place, brutally beating men and women alike. The posse then regrouped at Tommy Gray's home and assaulted his entire family, including his wife who suffered a fractured skull, in an effort to obtain information about the CFWU. Only an agitated Ralph Gray, who had rushed into the house armed, saved them from possible fatal consequences. Union organizer Jasper Kennedy was arrested for possessing twenty copies of the *Southern Worker*, and Holmes was picked up by police the following day, interrogated for several hours, and upon release fled to Chattanooga.²¹

Despite the violence, about 150 sharecroppers met with Coad the following evening in a vacant house southwest of Camp Hill. This time sentries were posted around the meeting place. When Sheriff Young arrived on the scene with Camp Hill police chief J. M. Wilson and Deputy A. J. Thompson, he found Ralph Gray standing guard about a quarter-mile from the meeting. Although accounts differ as to the sequence of events, both Gray and the sheriff traded harsh words and, in the heat of argument, exchanged buckshot. Young, who received gunshot wounds to the stomach, was rushed to a hospital in nearby Alexander City while Gray lay on the side of the road, his legs riddled

with bullets. Fellow union members carried Gray to his home where the group, including Mack Coad, barricaded themselves inside the house. The group held off a posse led by police chief J. M. Wilson long enough to allow most members to escape, but the wounded Ralph Gray opted to remain in his home until the end.²² The posse returned with reinforcements and found Gray lying in his bed and his family huddled in a corner. According to his brother, someone in the group “poked a pistol into Brother Ralph's mouth and shot down his throat.” The mob burned his home to the ground and dumped his body on the steps of the Dadeville courthouse. The mangled and lifeless leader became an example for other black sharecroppers as groups of armed whites took turns shooting and kicking the bloody corpse of Ralph Gray.²³

Over the next few days, between thirty-four and fifty-five black men were arrested near Camp Hill, nine of whom were under eighteen years of age.²⁴ Most of the defendants were charged with conspiracy to murder or with carrying a concealed weapon, but five union members, Dosie Miner, T. Patterson, William Gribb, John Finch, and Tommy Finch, were charged with assault to murder. Although police chief Wilson could not legally act out his wish to “kill every member of the ‘Reds’ there and throw them into the creek,” the Camp Hill police department stood idle as enraged white citizens waged genocidal attacks on the black community that left dozens wounded or dead and forced entire families to seek refuge in the woods. Union secretary Mack Coad, the vigilantes’ prime target, fled all the way to Atlanta. But few Tallapoosa Communists were as lucky as Coad. Estelle Milner suffered a fractured vertebra at the hands of police after a local black minister accused her of possessing ammunition.²⁵

Behind the violence in Tallapoosa County loomed the Scottsboro case. William G. Porter, secretary of the Montgomery branch of the NAACP, observed that vigilantes in and around Camp Hill were “trying to get even for Scottsboro.”²⁶ Rumors spread throughout the county that armed bands of blacks were roaming the countryside searching for landlords to murder and white women to rape. On July 18, for example, the *Birmingham Age-Herald* carried a story headlined “Negro Reds Reported Advancing” claiming that eight carloads of black Communists were on their way from Chattanooga to assist the Tallapoosa sharecroppers. In response, about 150 white men established a roadblock on the main highway north of the county only to meet a funeral procession from Sylacauga, Alabama, en route to a graveyard just north of Dadeville.²⁷

Outraged middle-class black leaders, clergymen, and white liberals blamed white Communists for the incident, asserting that armed

resistance on the part of black sharecroppers and tenants was unnatural. An investigation conducted by James D. Burton, Tennessee secretary for the CIC found “irresponsible white groups” to be the cause of the conflict, although illiteracy and poverty explained why black sharecroppers were “easily influenced by agitators, and easily misled in trying to find their way out of their difficulties.” Ralph Gray, the one homegrown anomaly, was deemed an exception because he presumably returned from Oklahoma and New Mexico “with radical ideas.”²⁸

Hoping to quell black unrest in the area, Robert Russa Moton, superintendent of Tuskegee Institute, dispatched representatives to Tallapoosa in a calculated move to turn blacks away from Communism. Likewise, L. N. Duncan, director of the Agricultural Extension Service based at the Alabama Polytechnic Institute, assured Governor Miller that several black county agents were “making a special effort to quiet the people down, urging them to put away their guns and calling their attention to the fact that they are badly misled [*sic*] by these communistic representatives.” The NAACP also made its presence felt, particularly after local authorities tried to implicate the association with the allegation that seized CFWU minute books belonged to “the Society for the Advancement of Colored People.” Walter White and local Birmingham NAACP leaders sharply denied any connection to the Communist-led union and accused the Party of using the NAACP's good name to mislead black sharecroppers.²⁹

While publicly admonishing the Communists for Camp Hill, Walter White quietly pursued the idea of providing legal defense for the jailed sharecroppers. He feared that if the ILD entered the case and won an acquittal, the Communists would “proclaim loudly that ‘mass Action’ had freed the Camp Hill defendants,” thus validating the ILD's legal defense strategies. But unlike Scottsboro, the Camp Hill defendants were members of the Party's organization; there was no question as to who was going to defend them. Governor Miller and the Dadeville sheriff's office received a flurry of telegrams and postcards protesting the arrests and demanding the death penalty for all those directly involved in the murder of Ralph Gray. The ILD further linked this case to the Scottsboro trial, focusing on the exclusion of blacks from Southern juries. Irving Schwab, an attorney for the Scottsboro defendants, secured the release of all but seven of the imprisoned sharecroppers because of insufficient evidence, and the remaining seven defendants were later released after their hearings were postponed indefinitely. Prominent Alabama citizens wary of creating another Scottsboro episode pressured authorities to quietly drop the case.³⁰

National Communist leadership praised the union's resistance at Camp Hill as vindication of the Party's slogan calling for the right of self-determination. The ILD's defense of the sharecroppers was further proof, they reasoned, of the effectiveness of mass pressure outside the courtroom. But union organizers found little romance in the bloodletting or in the uprooting of hundreds of poor black farmers that had followed the Camp Hill battle. Moreover, rural conditions in Tallapoosa County had not improved at all. By September, the height of the cotton picking season, landlords again promised to cut off all food and cash advances after the cotton was picked, and many tenants had to pick cotton on other plantations in order to earn enough to survive the winter. The going rate at the time was a meager thirty cents per one hundred pounds, a tiny sum considering the average laborer could only pick about two hundred pounds per day.³¹

The repression and the deteriorating economic conditions stunted the union's growth initially, but the lessons of Camp Hill also provided a stimulus for a new type of movement, reborn from the ashes of the old. On August 6, 1931, the fifty-five remaining CFWU members regrouped as the SCU and reconstituted five locals in Tallapoosa County.³²

Throughout 1931 the SCU existed without an organizational secretary. Between August 1931 and early 1932, the SCU's only direct link to the Party was a nineteen-year-old YCL organizer from Springfield, Massachusetts, named Harry Hirsch, who adopted the pseudonym "Harry Simms." Simms's role was that of liaison, intermittently carrying information back and forth between district leaders and the SCU locals, which now began to operate with virtually no CP direction. As Simms observed, they were meeting every week in small groups and "carrying on the work on their own initiative even [though] we have not sent an organizer down there."³³

Tommy Gray continued to organize, but because he was targeted by landlords and local authorities, escaping at least one attempted assassination, it was difficult for him to maneuver. Instead, Gray's daughter, nineteen-year-old YCL leader Eula Gray, held the movement together during this very critical period. When Simms left for Kentucky in 1931, Eula Gray assumed his role as liaison and served as ad hoc secretary until May 1932. By the time she left the post, the SCU in Tallapoosa County had grown to 591 members organized in twenty-eight locals, ten youth groups, and twelve women's auxiliaries; sixty-seven members were organized in nine Lee County locals, four of which were based in the town of Notasulga. Chambers and Macon counties each reported thirty members. As district bureau member Harry Wicks observed, "The croppers themselves are maintaining their

organization and reports are that they are holding meetings regularly without any direction from us, except what this little girl [Eula Gray] can impart to them.”³⁴

That Wicks could refer to a nineteen-year-old woman as a “little girl” illustrates his underestimation of female leadership, an attitude likely shared by other bureau members. Ignoring Gray's proven ability and her Tallapoosa roots, district organizer Nat Ross appointed twenty-five-year-old Al Murphy to the position of SCU secretary.³⁵ What would have become of the SCU if Gray continued as secretary, we will never know. However, Al Murphy proved to be a tremendous asset to the fledgling organization. Recognizing the need to expand beyond the eastern piedmont counties into the black belt, Murphy eventually established headquarters in Montgomery where he worked closely with that city's three leading black Communists: Charles Tasker, the leader of the Montgomery Unemployed Councils; his wife, Capitola Tasker, who directed the SCU Women's Auxiliaries; and Montgomery Party leader John Beans. Beans was unique in that he was the only black veteran trade union organizer in the Alabama Communist Party, having served as vice-president of the ASFL in 1902.³⁶

With Murphy in charge, white CP leaders stopped calling on black sharecroppers to “demonstrate in front of the landlord's house [and demand] that the food advances be continued until the crop is taken in.” Besides, local blacks had never taken these suicidal directives seriously. Murphy was well aware of the croppers' underground tradition of resistance, and he developed tactics that emphasized self-preservation and cunning. No meetings were to be held in empty houses; SCU members were not to walk in large crowds; and they were not to engage in armed action without notifying Murphy, unless, of course, it could not be avoided. Everything from their actions to their demeanor drew on subterranean forms of everyday resistance. Ned Cobb, a small landowner from Tallapoosa County who joined the SCU in 1932, was told “to act humble, be straight; his teachin, to not go at a thing too rapid and forcible. Be quiet, whatever we do, let it work in a way of virtue.” Yet, Murphy's instructions to “act humble” did not mean abandoning armed self-defense. Members such as Lemon Johnson, former secretary of the Hope Hull local, believed armed self-defense distinguished the SCU from other organizations. His own experience informed him that “the only thing going to stop them from killing you, you got to go shooting.” When Harry Haywood attended an SCU meeting in Dadeville, he was taken aback by what he described as “a small arsenal.” “There were guns,” he recalled, “of all kinds—shotguns, rifles and pistols. Sharecroppers were coming to the meeting armed and left their guns with their coats when they came



Lemon Johnson, SCU secretary of Hope Hull, Alabama, local, photographed in 1986 (photograph by author)

Murphy decentralized the organization by establishing captains for each local, and like Harry Simms and Eula Gray before him, he kept the locals informed of the situation in other counties. Dues were collected when possible, but most of the funds, never amounting to more than a few cents, were in the hands of the captains. They tended to the day-to-day organizing of the union, the women's auxiliaries, and the youth sections, and those who could write were responsible for sending articles to the Party's press detailing conditions in their respective areas. Murphy warned the captains against becoming tyrannical or egocentric with their power. "No captain is to act as a boss of his local," he frequently advised. Weekly meetings were supposed to be held, always in absolute secrecy to avoid police raids or vigilante attacks. Minutes were rarely kept because of the potential danger of keeping written records, not to mention the problem of literacy in the black belt. Union locals often cloaked their intentions by holding Bible meetings, and some secretaries recorded the minutes by underlining pertinent words or phrases in the Bible.³⁸

Black women's contribution to the SCU rarely appeared in the pages of the Party press, in part because their strong presence countered an essentially male-centered version of radicalism generated by Communist writers and national leaders, most of whom had never worked in the South. Indeed, the Party's advocacy of black self-determination conjured up masculine historical figures such as Toussaint L'Ouverture, Frederick Douglass, and Nat Turner, and

writers like Eugene Gordon and V. J. Jerome portrayed the movement as a struggle for manhood. Armed resistance, in particular, was deemed a masculine activity. When the central black character, a young Southern-born Communist, in Grace Lumpkin's novel *A Sign for Cain* observed "shot guns stacked in the corner of the cabin," he assured his comrades, "we ain't dealing with cowards, but men." For nearly all writers in Communist circles—black and white, male and female—the martyred Ralph Gray assumed the symbol of black manhood in the South. Radical poet Ruby Weems published a moving account of "The Murder of Ralph Gray," the final stanza closing the episode with a great climactic vision:

His muscles swelling into a mighty challenge,
Mount into a vision of a million clenched fists.
He wears his death like a joyous banner of solidarity,
A sceptre of militant Negro manhood.
He lies still and silent—but under his unmoving form
Rise hosts of dark, strong men,
The vast army of rebellion!

When leading Communist theoretician V. J. Jerome introduced his famous poem, "To a Black Man," he referred to the "slaughtered blood of Ralph Gray / black skinned share-cropper of Camp Hill."³⁹

These ideological constructions distorted black women's role in the SCU—women whose indispensable organizing skills and basic concerns were the foundation of union activity. The tradition of autonomous black women's religious and social organizations served as conduits for the broader movement and were prototypes for the women's auxiliaries. Frequently called "Sewing Clubs," the women's auxiliaries exercised considerable power within the union. Although they met separately to divert the suspicions of local authorities and, according to observers, "so one parent can stay with children when the other is away," the Sewing Clubs provided forums to discuss conditions and formulate strategy. These women read the *Daily Worker*, the *Southern Worker*, and *Working Woman* when they could get it, and generated a stream of correspondence that linked their local struggles with the national and international movement. Union wives or girls with a modicum of formal education wrote brief descriptive letters to the Party's daily and regional tabloids. Usually the result of collective discussion within the union locals, the letters were "often scribbled on a piece of sack or crumpled wrapping paper."⁴⁰

These letters seem to support the contention that women's assigned role in the sexual division of labor, in this case motherhood, lay at the

root of women's collective action and radicalization—a manifestation of “female consciousness.”⁴¹ A common theme that runs through most of these letters, as well as speeches by black female Communists, is the overall inability of women to feed and care for their families under intolerable conditions. A Tallapoosa County YCL organizer expressed the sentiments of her comrades: “We are tired of seeing our children go naked and hungry, crying for bread. . . . We must raise our voices louder against this. Not only I myself am suffering, but millions of mothers and children are suffering.” Speaking before the Women's Congress against War and Fascism in Paris, Capitola Tasker acknowledged that she joined the movement “for the benefit of the children now living and the children who are to come.”⁴²

Women's radicalization through “female consciousness” does not tell us the whole story, however. Party rhetoric at the national level tended to overemphasize the family economy and the oppression of women as mothers because Communists constructed a vision of working-class militancy that generally excluded women and thus tended to overshadow the struggles of women without children or whose children were grown.⁴³ But women joined the SCU as workers and farmers seeking equal wages and better conditions. As a political movement that encouraged women's involvement, at least in rhetoric, the SCU also served as a lever of power since outright repression of women's participation could lead to charges of “male chauvinism”—an imported phrase that entered some black women's vocabulary via *Working Woman* and other CP tabloids. Finally, union and auxiliary meetings provided a needed respite from daily chores and freed women from child care since men were expected to take up the slack during Sewing Club meetings.

Murphy, an unflinching supporter of the Party's demand for self-determination in the black belt, had very definite ideas about the radical character of the SCU. He saw within each and every member “standard bearers of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, Frederick Douglass,” and regarded the all-black movement as the very embodiment of black self-determination. Nonetheless, the SCU received some tacit support from poor white farmers. Once in a while sympathetic poor white tenant farmers, especially women, attended SCU meetings. In Lemon Johnson's words, most white tenant farmers “wanted this color line broke down better than us do. . . . Some of them be with us in the meetings, the white women. And some of these white men from out here be with us in the meeting, help bringing this thing down. Be telling us some things that half the people crying on to God.” Some poor whites were obviously attracted to the SCU's program, but racial divisions in the black belt were drawn so sharply that black organizers felt it was too dangerous to even discuss the

union with whites. "I'd like to see [whites] come along with us," admitted one SCU member, "but I ain't gonna go out and ask them. That's too dangerous." Some whites paid a dear price for their sympathy. In 1934, white Tallapoosa tenant farmer J. W. Davis was kidnapped and lynched by vigilantes because of his support for the SCU.⁴⁴

Open membership was impossible but poor whites showed their support in a variety of ways, from providing food and supplies to known union members to hiding activists during crises.⁴⁵ Perhaps the most common form of support that allowed individuals to retain their anonymity was voting. In Elmore County, an SCU stronghold, 275 votes were cast for William Z. Foster and James Ford in the 1932 presidential election. (Herbert Hoover only received 160 votes from Elmore county!) This is an astounding figure when one considers that the all-white electorate was comprised of only 3,641 voters. Overall, 49 percent of the state's Communist vote in 1932 came from Elmore, Crenshaw (54 votes), and Perry (33 votes)—counties in which the SCU was active. The Communists' surprising showing in Elmore, however, might also reflect white farmers' disillusionment with the two-party system. As one frustrated mainstream Democrat declared in 1932, Elmore voters "are uncertain about what to do or what they want to do; their minds are not normal."⁴⁶

Support was also forthcoming from a small group of white liberals in Montgomery who had formed a Marxist study group during the 1930s. Composed of "some of the most prominent and richest people in Montgomery," the largely female group included teachers, social workers, and wives of upper-middle-class Jews interested in world peace and domestic social reforms. Most prominent were Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein, who was regarded by his congregation at Temple Beth Or as somewhat of an iconoclast, and Olive Stone, a professor of Sociology and dean at Montevallo College, who had traveled to the USSR in the 1920s. Apparently, no one in the group joined the Communist Party, but they provided crucial financial and moral support for Communist activities in Birmingham, Montgomery, and the cotton belt. Olive Stone, for example, secretly made occasional donations of \$50 to \$100 to the SCU.⁴⁷

After a year of rebuilding following Camp Hill, the union emerged stronger than ever. A threatened pickers' strike in 1932 won union members on at least one Tallapoosa plantation the right to sell their own cotton directly as well as a continuation of winter food advances. Days after the victory was announced, organizer Luther Hughley was arrested for vagrancy, but soon after he was placed in police custody, he was accused of kidnapping a white woman from Camp Hill. Before

a mass campaign could be initiated, however, Hughley was released and threatened with rope and faggot if he did not leave the county.⁴⁸ Aside from Hughley's arrest and the aborted pickers' strike, Camp Hill remained rather quiet and uneventful after the cotton had been picked. While most farmers prepared for the coming winter, five SCU organizers joined Al Murphy as delegates to the National Farmers' Relief Conference in Washington, D.C., in December.⁴⁹ The peace did not last very long. Exactly two weeks after the delegation left Alabama for the conference, the SCU in Tallapoosa County once again found itself embroiled in an explosive battle with local authorities.

It all started near Reeltown, an area about fifteen miles southwest of Camp Hill. The SCU's armed stand centered around a landlord's attempt to seize the property of Clifford James, a debt-ridden farmer who had been struggling desperately to purchase the land he worked. The story actually dates back to 1926, when James borrowed \$950 to purchase the seventy-seven-acre plot he was working from Notasulga merchant W. S. Parker. The full cost of the land was \$1,500. In addition to the borrowed money, James paid \$250 in cash and sold \$450 worth of timber from his property. Parker then absorbed James's debt by taking out a mortgage on the land. After advancing James money, food, and implements in 1927, Parker sold him three mules on credit, which then augmented James's debt to \$1,500. James's friend and fellow SCU member, Ned Cobb, was also indebted to Parker. "[Parker] had it in for me," Cobb recalled. "He knew I had good stock and I was a good worker and all like that. He just aimed to use his power to break me down; he'd been doin to people that way before then."⁵⁰

When the SCU reorganized in Tallapoosa County, its approach to debt peonage attracted James and hundreds of other black farmers. As a result of debates within the Communist Party's National Negro Commission, the SCU added to its core program the abolition of all debts owed by poor farmers and tenants, as well as interest charged on necessary items such as food, clothes, and seed. The SCU's solution to indebtedness had appealed to so many black tenants and small landowners that even W. S. Parker felt the union's policies damaged relations between him and his tenants. "The reaction among James and several other Negroes," Parker admitted, "who before had shown a spirit of cooperation to the mentioning of foreclosures, seemed to point conclusively that there was some sort of sinister influence at work among them." James threw himself into the movement, becoming a Communist and a leader of an SCU local that included farmers from Reeltown and Lee County.⁵¹

Parker blamed this "sinister influence" for his inability to reach an

agreement with James concerning his debts. Unable to come to terms, Parker asked Deputy Sheriff Cliff Elder to serve a writ of attachment on James's livestock. When Elder arrived on December 19, 1932, about fifteen armed SCU members were already standing outside James's home prepared to resist or avert the seizure. Although the group challenged established property rights by protecting James's right to retain his livestock in contravention of the law, they tried to avoid a gun battle. Their collective stand differed from the individualized practice of hiding vulnerable items, but the first stages of confrontation remained clearly within the traditional boundaries of rural paternalism. Ned Cobb humbly pleaded with Elder: "Please sir, don't take it. Go to the ones that authorized you to take his stuff, if you please, sir, and tell em to give him a chance. He'll work to pay what he owes em." When Elder and his black assistant officer attempted to seize the animals, humility ceased. James and Cobb warned them against taking the animals, and Elder interpreted their warnings as death threats. Fearing for his life, he left James's farm, promising to return to "kill you niggers in a pile."⁵²

Elder returned a few hours later with three reinforcements—Chief Deputy Dowdle Ware, former sheriff J. M. Gaunt, and a local landlord named J. H. Alfred. Several SCU members barricaded themselves in James's home and others stood poised at the barn. Shots were exchanged almost as soon as the four men stepped onto the property, but when Elder's small posse "seed that crowd of niggers at the barn throw up their guns they jumped in the car" and fled from the vicinity. Unable to persuade Governor Miller to dispatch state troops, Sheriff Young proceeded to form his own posse, gathering men from Lee, Macon, Elmore, and Montgomery counties to scour the area for suspected SCU members.⁵³

When the shoot-out was over, SCU member John McMullen lay dead, and several others were wounded, including Clifford James, Milo Bentley, Thomas Moss, and Ned Cobb. Within the next few days, at least twenty union members were rounded up and thrown in jail.⁵⁴ Several of those arrested were not involved in the shoot-out, but their names were discovered when the police returned to James's home and uncovered the SCU local's membership list along with "considerable Communistic literature." The violence that followed eclipsed the Camp Hill affair of 1931. Entire families were forced to take refuge in the woods; white vigilante groups broke into black homes and seized guns, ammunition, and other property; and blacks were warned that if they appeared in the Liberty Hill section of Reeltown they would be shot on sight. A blind black woman reported to be nearly one hundred years old was severely beaten and pistol whipped by a group of vigilantes, and one Tallapoosa doctor claimed to have treated at least

a dozen black patients with gunshot wounds.⁵⁵

Despite severe injuries to his back, James managed to walk seventeen miles to Tuskegee Institute's hospital. After dressing James's gunshot wounds, Dr. Eugene Dibble of Tuskegee contacted the Macon County sheriff, who then removed James to a cold, damp cell at the Montgomery County jail. Milo Bentley, who reportedly had been shot in the head, back, and arms, was also taken to Montgomery County jail. Observers claimed that Bentley and James received no medical treatment from their jailers and both were found "lying on filthy and flimsy blankets on the floor. Cliff James was lying naked on the floor in a separate cage, delirious from the loss of blood and with blood-soaked dirty dressings over those wounds which had been dressed." On December 27, James died from infected wounds and pneumonia, both caused by the lack of medical treatment. Ten and one-half hours later, Bentley's lifeless body was found in the same condition.⁵⁶

About four or five days after the shoot-out, the ILD and the SCU in Tallapoosa County held a mass meeting in Camp Hill and elected a committee of fifteen to investigate the arrests. The ILD sent attorneys Irving Schwab and George Chamlee to Montgomery on behalf of the imprisoned black farmers, but because jail authorities denied ILD representatives access to the prisoners, they had very little information with which to prepare a case. The ILD faced other unforeseen obstacles. Its Birmingham office was ransacked by police, or vigilantes masquerading as law officers, and within hours police arrested several Communist organizers. Despite these setbacks, the ILD held a very successful public meeting at the Old Pythian Temple on January 2, 1933, to protest the arrests and to censure Robert Moton and staff members at Tuskegee Institute for their complicity in the deaths of James and Bentley. A few days later, a mass funeral was held for the two martyred union organizers. Pall bearers carrying two caskets draped with banners emblazoned with deep red hammers and sickles led a procession of three thousand people, most of whom were black. The mourners marched six miles through Birmingham to Grace Hills Cemetery on the southern side of the city, cordoned by an additional one thousand people who crowded the sidewalks along the route of the procession.⁵⁷

As more detailed accounts of the shoot-out reached the press, Tuskegee Institute increasingly became a target of criticism. An elderly Alabama black woman, Abbie Elmore Bugg, castigated Moton personally. "Now, if you love your neighbor as yourself," she asked, "why did you not protect those two poor wounded negro farmers? Why did you let them die? A good enemy [*sic*] of all races I should say you be, in a time of real need." William McArthur from Detroit

charged Moton and his staff “with the murder of [Milo] Bentley and Cliff James.” “You so-called Negro leaders,” he continued, “are Nothing but a bunch of traitors. Dirty reformis [*sic*] Bootlicking helping the Landlord robbers take the Negro Farmers Cotton and land [and] Other Products from them.” Although Moton believed all the attacks directed at him and the institute were Communist-inspired, he refrained from blaming the Communists for Reeltown. “The recent outbreaks of violence,” he explained to one inquirer, “between whites and Negroes in that County are primarily the results of the prevailing tenant system in the South that has long since outlived its usefulness.” Yet, while the institute was sensitive to black farmers’ needs, it rejected unionization as a strategy for change. Tuskegee’s statistician and expert on rural affairs, Monroe Work, admitted that the institute’s “general policy... is to discourage the organization of Negro Farmers.”⁵⁸

Like the Camp Hill shoot-out in 1931, white liberals and the Southern press blamed Communists for the Reeltown incident. Although a Birmingham *Post* editorial dissented from other newspapers by discussing the indigenous economic roots of the conflict, the writer still placed considerable blame on Party propaganda and black inferiority: “It is the ignorance of the negro which makes him prey to the incendiary literature with which the mail boxes of both white and negro farmers of Tallapoosa County have been stuffed. It is this literature which transforms him from a law abiding citizen into one who defies the law. . . . The average negro in his normal state of mind does not consider firing on officers seeking to carry out the law.”⁵⁹

Many black middle-class leaders agreed that the menace of Communism lurked behind the events at Reeltown. The Atlanta *Daily World* advised blacks to ignore the Communists and instead to “battle for our rights legally in the courts, and economically through mass-owned businesses.” But the black elite was not in complete accord. The Reverend M. Nunn, a black Tallapoosa minister, admitted that he had little support from established black leaders for his campaign against the SCU. As he put it, “I am the only Negro that I know of, working every day with the Officers in locating these [Communist] Units in this Section of Alabama.” Some respected middle-class blacks even offered support for the union. At the height of the crisis, one relatively wealthy black landlord let Al Murphy hide on his farm and use his barn as an office to produce SCU leaflets.⁶⁰

The trial of the SCU members illustrates the extent of the union’s popularity in the eastern piedmont. So many black sharecroppers crowded into the courtroom that Solicitor Sam W. Oliver decided to

postpone the trial until the excitement subsided. When proceedings resumed in late April, county officials set up roadblocks outside Dadeville to discourage blacks from attending. Nevertheless, black farmers evaded the roadblocks by traveling through gullies and back roads and filled the courtroom once again. The all-white jury convicted five of the nineteen SCU members indicted for assault with a deadly weapon. Ned Cobb was given twelve to fifteen years; Clinton Moss and Alf White received ten years each; Judson Simpson was sentenced to a maximum of twelve years; and Sam Moss was given five to six years.⁶¹

The confrontation at Reeltown apparently did not discourage the union's recruitment efforts. By June 1933, Al Murphy reported a membership of nearly 2,000 organized in 73 locals, 80 women's auxiliaries, and 20 youth groups. New locals were formed in Dale and Randolph counties and in the border town of West Point, Georgia. The Communists also established 5 additional rural Party units, each composed of 30 to 35 members.⁶² In other parts of the rural South, those who stood their ground at Reeltown were celebrated in rural folklore, as exemplified in the following verses composed just a few months after the incident and sung by sharecroppers in Rock Hill, South Carolina:

What you gwine do nigger, wit' the power dat's in yo' ahm?
Git wipin' yo eye tear, 'till de strenff is dead an' gone?
Bowed down on yo' knees, 'till turkey buzzard git through
wit' you?

Wa' cher gwine do nigger, ain' nothin' lak what ah said
Do lak Alabamy boys an' win or be foun' dead.⁶³

National Communist leaders regarded the SCU as the finest contemporary example of black revolutionary traditions. The apparent militancy of the burgeoning movement was the proof Communist theoreticians needed to justify the slogan demanding self-determination in the black belt. But the union's rank-and-file, who had little time to theorize about the changes taking place in the rural South, found little to celebrate. Black farmers were organizing primarily for their own survival and for a greater share in the decaying system of cotton tenancy. They might have won the battle to exist, but by late 1933 the SCU faced an additional set of problems when the federal government decided to intervene in the production process.

Congress and President Roosevelt attempted to reinvigorate the country's dying cotton economy with the AAA. Conceived in 1933 as an emergency measure, the AAA was supposed to increase the purchasing power of landowning farmers by subsidizing acreage reduction. A year later the Cotton Control Act and the Gin Tax Act, both sponsored by Alabama senator John Bankhead, made cotton reduction programs compulsory and added a mandatory tax on the ginning of all cotton above the specified quota. Southern sharecroppers were supposed to receive one-ninth of the 1934–35 benefit checks, but in most cases they received nothing since local planters controlled distribution of parity payments. Moreover, landlords used the Gin Tax Act as a lever to obtain their tenants' cotton. In order to gin cotton without paying the tax, tenants had to obtain gin certificates from their landlords or from local planter-dominated AAA boards. If a tenant refused to give the cotton to his or her landlord to be ginned, the landlord would withhold the gin certificate until cotton prices dropped.⁶⁴

At first such abuses were commonplace, and a liberal section of the Agricultural Adjustment Administration tried to restructure the distribution process. However, most planters did not have to engage in fraud in order to benefit from New Deal policies. They merely reallocated land, evicted redundant tenants, and applied the cash subsidies to wages rather than sharing it with their tenants. New Deal policies, therefore, indirectly stimulated a structural change in the cotton economy—the mechanization of agriculture. Cotton production remained unmechanized for so long partly because most landlords lacked capital and because the units of production—plots farmed by tenants and sharecroppers—were too small to warrant adoption of expensive technology. Tenancy provided the cheap labor needed to make the transition to mechanization, but it limited production to small, segmented units. By farming larger units of production, landlords could apply the parity payments and savings derived from not furnishing tenants to tractors, fertilizers, and other implements needed for large-scale cotton farming. Local relief administrators helped the landlords by clearing the relief rolls during cotton picking and cotton chopping seasons, thus ensuring an abundant supply of cheap labor.⁶⁵

As large portions of the 1933 crop were being plowed under and the first wave of tenants was being evicted, the SCU called strikes on several cotton plantations in Chambers and Lee counties and demanded fifty cents per one hundred pounds. The union's first attempted strike since its founding three years earlier crumbled, however, when seven SCU leaders were arrested and posses forced pickers back into the fields. Although the strike failed, thousands of

evicted tenants in Alabama began turning to the SCU for assistance. By March 1934, the union claimed 6,000 members and established locals in the black belt counties of Lowndes, Macon, Montgomery, and Dallas. The SCU's sudden growth in the black belt prompted Murphy to move the underground headquarters from Birmingham to Montgomery. The proliferation of black belt locals was directly linked to mass evictions and landlord abuses stemming from the AAA. As Murphy pointed out, nearly half of the SCU's membership was recruited between July 1933 and April 1934. According to one SCU leader in Camp Hill, because of the AAA, the union "is taking on new life. . . . The SCU in places where [it] has been slack [is] beginning to wake up and people don't wait for the comrades to come as they used to."⁶⁶

The SCU adopted a variety of methods to deal with landlords' abuses of the parity program. First, because hundreds of evicted tenants and sharecroppers were simultaneously removed from relief rolls and CWA projects so that cheap wage labor would be available for cotton chopping, union organizers fought for immediate relief and tried to persuade federal authorities to investigate local CWA administrators. In February 1934, a group of black women organized a "Committee of Action," marched down to the CWA office in Camp Hill, and eventually won partial demands for relief. Tenants and sharecroppers who had not yet been evicted were instructed not to sign the joint parity checks unless the landlords paid their portion in cash rather than use the funds to settle debts. SCU members often refused to give up their rental share of cotton unless they received their portion of the AAA check. The union also convinced some day laborers and cotton pickers to boycott plantations that were considered "vicious in their treatment of tenants and sharecroppers." On one plantation in Chambers County, a boycott of this kind led to the arrests of eleven union members.⁶⁷

Late that summer the SCU prepared for another cotton pickers' strike in Lee and Tallapoosa counties. With a demand of one dollar per hundred pounds, the strike started in mid-September on B. W. Meadows's plantation in Tallapoosa County and soon spread to several large plantations in both counties, involving between seven hundred and one thousand pickers. The landlords' first response was to evict the strikers, but because it was the height of the cotton picking season, planters needed all available labor. With the support of local police, the planters turned to force to break the strike. In Lee County, police arrested seven union members for distributing strike leaflets, and in Tallapoosa vigilantes shot at least three strikers, including a woman Party organizer. Pinned to the doors of several suspected strikers' homes was the following message: "WARNING, TAKE NOTICE. If you want

to do well and have a healthy life you better leave the Share Croppers' Union." Hooded night riders in Lee County kidnapped and beat SCU organizer Comit Talbert, and later in the evening two more Lee County sharecroppers were kidnapped, draped in chains, and taken to a nearby swamp where vigilantes threatened to drown them if they remained in the union. The local sheriff intervened but arrested the shackled black sharecroppers and held them on charges of attempted murder.⁶⁸

The Alabama Relief Administration also played a crucial role in undermining the strike. As soon as the SCU announced plans for a cotton pickers' strike, Thad Holt, director of the state relief administration, dropped from the relief rolls all "able bodied" workers who did not volunteer to pick cotton for wages. Even the state reemployment agency in Birmingham relocated several people with "farm experience" to the cotton fields.⁶⁹

In spite of repression, mass evictions, and the expanded pool of cheap labor, the SCU claimed some substantial victories. On most of the plantations affected, the union won at least seventy-five cents per one hundred pounds, and in areas not affected by the strike, landlords reportedly increased wages from thirty-five cents per hundred pounds to fifty cents or more in order to avert the spread of the strike. On Howard Graves's plantation, located on the border of Lee and Tallapoosa counties, union members not only won the sought-after one dollar per hundred pounds, but they forced Graves to raise monthly credit allowances from ten to fifteen dollars. Finally, the SCU claimed a small victory on General C. L. Pearson's plantation when about one thousand sharecroppers and tenants refused to gin their cotton at Pearson's gin. By taking their cotton to an independent gin in Dadeville, they saved money and prevented Pearson from seizing their cotton to cover past debts.⁷⁰

The 1934 cotton pickers' strike marked the SCU's first major victory since its birth three years earlier. As tales of the union's stand in Tallapoosa County spread from cabin to cabin, so did the union's popularity; by October, Murphy reported a total membership of eight thousand.⁷¹ The celebration ended abruptly, however, as thousands of families found themselves landless during the harsh winter of 1934–35. The eight-thousand-strong union stood helpless in the face of New Deal-induced evictions, and no antifascist slogans or demands for self-determination could solve their quandary.

Chapter Three: Organize or Starve!

Communists, Labor, and Antiradical Violence

Go down in Alabama,
Organize ev'ry living man,
Spread the news all over the lan'
We got the union back again!

—*“This What the Union Done,”* ca. 1930s

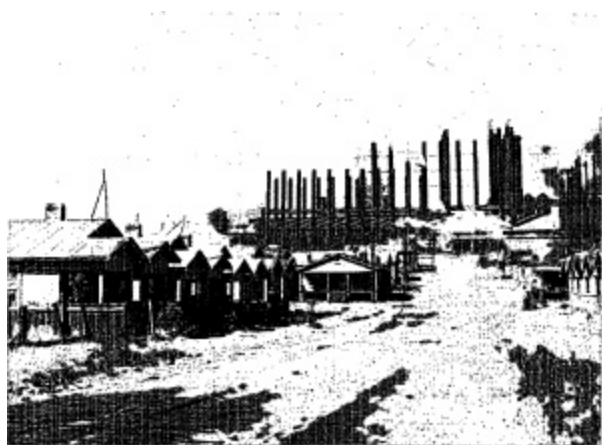
We ought to handle you reds like Mussolini does ‘em in Italy—take you out and shoot you against the wall. And I sure would like to have the pleasure of doing it.

—Birmingham detective J. T. Moser, 1934

After three years of sustained activity, Communist-led trade unions remained virtually nonexistent in Birmingham's mines and mills. Unlike the urban jobless and rural poor who comprised the Party's rank-and-file, employed industrial workers had much more at stake. Knowing full well that their jobs could easily be filled by desperate soldiers in the reserve army of labor, few could afford to openly associate with Communists. But as Birmingham moved deeper into the throes of depression, conditions deteriorated to such a degree that even workers able to hold on to their jobs found it increasingly difficult to survive. In 1931, TCI-owned mines and mills cut wages by 25 percent followed by a 15 percent reduction in May 1932. More devastating for workers, however, were cutbacks in operations that effectively forced large numbers of employees to accept work on a part-time basis. TCI, Sloss-Sheffield, and Woodward Iron Company implemented a three-day schedule in 1931, and some steel workers and miners worked as little as one or two days per month.¹

Birmingham's industrialists chose to reduce hours rather than lay off the bulk of their labor force in order to retain cheap labor in case market fluctuations created a sudden demand. While some workers found jobs elsewhere, the peculiar structure of the company-owned settlements held most in residence, reducing them to virtual peons of their employers. Whether the settlements were located in an isolated mining community or owned by a steel company in an industrial

suburb, they shared numerous similarities. Residents of the company-owned homes were at the whims of their employers—any challenge to the rules or breach of agreement, written or spoken, could lead to eviction. Because rent was so inexpensive (about five or six dollars per month in 1930), few workers chose to strike out beyond the company settlement. More importantly, companies generally did not evict workers unable to pay the rent, choosing instead to retrieve back payments through payroll deduction at a later date. The apparent gesture of goodwill had its price: resident workers living under this arrangement *had* to work upon request, irrespective of minor ailments or other related problems, and those who failed to show were either threatened or beaten by the company's “shack rouser” or were promptly evicted.² Structured along the lines of an armed camp and resembling in some ways South Africa's mining compounds, the company-owned settlements were also intended to insulate workers from outside influences, namely labor organizers. Employers maintained a private police force, paid spies to collect information and monitor workers’ activities, and employed every available means to create an impenetrable shield around the community.³



Company suburb: double-tenant shotgun houses line streets just outside Republic Steel plant in Birmingham (Farm Security Administration photograph, courtesy Library of Congress)

In addition to wages and living space, employers used commodities, mainly food, to retain and control industrial workers. The less expensive private grocers were naturally workers’ first choice, but most employers paid wages in scrip worth about sixty cents on the dollar, to be used exclusively at the company commissary. Even when workers received direct wages, the availability of credit created a cycle of dependency not easily broken. And miners who resided in isolated settlements had few alternative establishments with which to

trade.⁴

Reductions in wages and hours during the early 1930s increased workers' debts to the point where other means of survival were not only necessary but encouraged by employers. Like most Birmingham unemployed, miners and steel workers turned to gardening and keeping livestock, especially chickens and pigs. TCI and other large companies encouraged cultivation by renting land to employees at an incredibly cheap rate and making company-owned mules available for plowing. These worker-owned gardens were cultivated primarily by women, whose presence the company clearly took advantage of as a reservoir of free labor. In communities with few employment opportunities for women, the companies indirectly benefited from the labor of workers' wives and daughters because unpaid household and agricultural work was necessary to reproduce the labor power of male industrial workers. In addition to cultivating gardens, these women canned goods, made clothes, washed dust-stained "muckers" (work clothes), repaired homes, and to survive the freezing winters without heat, made quilts. "The houses was as cold as I don't know what," recalls Louise Burns, the wife of a black Alabama coal miner who remembers spending much of her time making quilts, gathering coal, and patching up holes in the walls. "We did all this stuff to help keep things warm and going the best we could. Yeah. We had plenty to do." In some cases, the exploitation of female labor was more direct. Foremen and high-ranking officials often had their laundry washed by workers' wives and daughters for as little as fifty cents per load.⁵ Women's unpaid labor and the proliferation of gardens certainly ensured family survival, but these practices also helped the company by mitigating reductions in wages and hours without seriously damaging the social reproduction of labor. In other words, the burden of survival fell increasingly upon the shoulders of women, not as paid workers contributing household income directly, but as unpaid producers whose labor ensured the maintenance of the industrial worker.⁶

For the most part, this tenuous mode of survival, visible mainly in the form of company paternalism, worked against labor activism, especially during the pre-New Deal period. The availability of work, credit, "free" rent, and land for cultivation, instilled a sense of complacency within the labor force, and any rumblings of opposition were quickly crushed by threats, intimidation, or violence. Early in 1930, for example, when no more than a dozen Communists roamed the streets of Birmingham, the AFL launched a massive campaign to organize white Alabama textile workers, of whom some 85 percent lived in company towns. Yet, even with the support of several state political figures, including Governor Bibb Graves, the drive completely

failed. Although the campaign was conceived in response to North Carolina's Communist-led textile strikes in 1929, opponents harkened back to those very events to depict the conservative AFL organizers as “a band of invading agitators, who were coming from the outside to disrupt the peace and harmony” between labor and capital.⁷

The utter failure of the AFL's organizing drive was a foreboding of the Communists' first three years as labor activists. Aside from intermittent attempts to organize bakery workers and black women employed in Birmingham's burgeoning mechanical laundries,⁸ Communists concentrated exclusively on building the NMU and the Steel and Metal Workers' Industrial Union—both affiliates of the TUUL. From its beginnings in 1930–33, the NMU failed dismally in Alabama, partly because its dual-union tactics were ineffective in a region with no competing labor organizations. In other areas the NMU sought to attract renegade UMWA members into its own ranks or to build a groundswell of opposition to UMWA leaders. Birmingham NMU organizers, however, had to build an interracial union from scratch. Not surprisingly, their early efforts bore little fruit. Communists barely penetrated the armed mining camps, and following a spate of arrests and beatings by TCI police, the fledgling NMU eventually abandoned its campaign.⁹

The Steel and Metal Workers' Industrial Union did not fare much better during the pre-NRA period. In 1931, Communist shop units at the Stockham Pipe and Fittings Company and the U.S. Pipe Shop called for a walkout in response to a general 10 percent wage cut, but workers ignored the strike call. Yet, the dual-union policies proved slightly more effective in steel because of the presence of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, a considerably weak craft union that had been in existence since the early part of the century. The Communists assailed Amalgamated for practicing racial discrimination and ignoring the unskilled, prompting dozens of black steel workers to protest the union's exclusionary policies. By the time Amalgamated launched its organizing drive under the NIRA, complaints from black workers compelled the union to open its ranks, although its president, W. H. Crawford, was quick to explain publicly that the “union, of course, is not seeking to elevate the negro.”¹⁰

Alabama's languishing labor movement was given an unprecedented boost in 1933, when Congress passed the NIRA. The provisions established under section 7(a) stipulated that in the industries covered under the NIRA code, employees could not be prevented from joining a labor union. Employers also had to pay minimum wage rates and to observe regulations setting the maximum

hours of work as well as other employment rules set forth in the NIRA for their respective industries. Labor responded with renewed enthusiasm; only two months after the NIRA was signed into law, an estimated sixty-five thousand workers joined unions affiliated with either the Birmingham or Bessemer trades and labor councils. The resurgence of industrial labor organization was most apparent in the Alabama coal fields. Under the leadership of Indiana labor organizer and former Socialist William Mitch, the UMWA initiated a successful campaign during the summer of 1933 and reorganized Alabama's District 20 within a few months. Despite retaliatory layoffs and evictions, by August eighty-seven locals had been organized throughout the state, and within months thousands of miners walked off their jobs demanding union recognition.¹¹

The Communists were unimpressed by the NIRA, arguing that it was intended to force workers into company unions. Alabama Party leaders criticized the act for not covering agricultural and domestic workers and for imposing regional wage differentials, accurately predicting that industrialists would respond by replacing black labor with whites rather than pay blacks the sanctioned minimum wage.¹² Nonetheless, Birmingham Communists responded eagerly to the sudden surge of labor activity, and by mid-1933 organizing the unorganized replaced joblessness as their primary issue. At the CPUSA's Extraordinary National Conference held in New York in July, delegates issued an "Open Letter to All Members of the Communist Party" calling for an intensification of trade union work. Birmingham Communists signaled the new emphasis on organized labor by holding an unemployed and trade union conference two weeks before the 1933 elections. Although most of its organizers were arrested before the meeting began, the conference was supposed to be a forum to discuss the labor movement's future and to develop strategies for establishing rank-and-file committees within the unions. The Party further highlighted the new line by nominating two TCI employees to run for Birmingham city commission in the 1933 elections. Mark Ellis, a young, white, trade union organizer and Communist candidate for commission president, shared the ticket with black TCI steel worker David James, who ran for associate commissioner. Their campaign platform focused mainly on building the labor movement and securing the right to organize. They continued to advocate more relief and an end to evictions of unemployed workers and vowed to cut the police budget, arguing that it would not only free money for municipal relief projects but reduce antilabor repression and police brutality throughout the city.¹³

The Party's industrial organizing campaign took hold rather quickly. The number of Communist shop units in Birmingham

increased from five to fourteen within a few months, and by January 1934 Alabama had 496 dues-paying Communists.¹⁴ In accordance with Central Committee directives, the Alabama cadre also made a greater effort to recruit more whites. While they hoped to draw progressive white industrial workers, what they got was an eclectic mix of hoboes, ex-Klansmen, and intellectuals who had been reduced to semipoverty by the depression. An example of the latter was Israel Berlin, a thirty-two-year-old Lithuanian-born Jew who held a B.S. degree from the Alabama Polytechnic Institute. After losing his job as a chemist and failing to secure a commensurate position, Berlin spent much of his idle time studying the economic crisis. Dissatisfied with Republican and Democratic panaceas, Berlin joined the Communist Party in 1933 and became its full-time literature agent in Birmingham.¹⁵



Clyde Johnson, ca. 1937 (photograph by Dolly Speed, courtesy Clyde Johnson)

The local cadre was also infused with talented individuals from outside the South. The New York-born Jewish radical Boris Israel had already gained notoriety in Memphis for leading several unemployed demonstrations and for defending a black man accused of raping a

white woman. By December 1933, police and vigilante pressure had forced him to take refuge in Chicago, but he returned South a few months later. Adopting the pseudonym "Blaine Owen," he settled in Birmingham in 1934 and resumed his work on behalf of the Communist Party. The addition of Clyde Johnson, a lean, tall, soft-spoken young Communist organizer, benefited the industrial campaign immensely. Born in 1908 in Proctor, Minnesota, Johnson was only fifteen when the Duluth, Missabe and Northern Railroad hired him to work during the summers. After two years at Duluth Junior College, in 1929 he moved to New York and secured work as a draftsman for Western Electric Company while attending courses at City College of New York. Drawn immediately to the campus Left, Johnson emerged as a leading militant at CCNY, was elected national organizer for the NSL, and joined the Communist Party. Accompanied by Don West, a radical Southern preacher and poet who would also join the CP, Johnson was dispatched to Rome, Georgia, in 1933 at the behest of the NSL to assist in a student strike at Martha Berry School. Johnson remained in Rome, helped lead a strike of foundry workers, and briefly organized farmers for the Farm Holiday Association. Harassed, arrested, beaten, and eventually forced to flee the county, he left Rome and headed for Atlanta to replace the incarcerated Angelo Herndon; there he met ILD activist and future wife, Leah Anne Agron. Reassigned to Alabama in 1934, he soon became the Party's leading labor organizer in the Birmingham district.¹⁶

By the time Johnson and other Communists began organizing coal miners in Walker and Jefferson counties, many of the obstacles that had hindered the TUUL during the pre-New Deal era no longer prevailed. Communists could now work as an alternative force within existing industrial unions that enjoyed limited support from the federal government. More importantly, the horrible living and working conditions in both the coal and ore mines had effectively nourished labor militancy. Accidental deaths caused by falling rocks, cave-ins, uncontrolled loading cars, or natural gas explosions occurred often, and workers disabled or suffering from lung-related diseases received no benefits. Coal operators avoided responsibility by contracting out work to skilled white miners who would hire their own loaders, blasters, and common laborers. When workers complained about pay rate, hours, or health or safety conditions, company representatives would simply point the finger at the contractor, freeing the large corporate entities from any responsibility while reducing capital outlays to a bare minimum. Another obvious point of contention was the operator's practice of appointing checkweighmen. The checkweighmen, whose job was to weigh the loaded cars of coal, frequently cheated the contractor and his workers

by adjusting the weight to company-imposed maximums and ignoring actual output.¹⁷

Blacks, who in 1930 constituted 62 percent of the coal miners in Jefferson County, suffered most under the prevailing system. Not only were blacks paid less than whites for the same work, but operators tended to use wider screens for coal mined by blacks, effectively reducing the tonnage for which they were credited. Nor were black miners paid for “dead work,” such as post- and pre-production cleanup, for which their white co-workers were paid. Occupational discrimination also reduced wages and placed a ceiling on job mobility. While white workers held exclusive rights to positions such as contractor or machine operator, blacks rarely rose above coal loading, pick mining, and other unskilled, often seasonal, occupations.¹⁸

Despite William Mitch's commitment to interracial solidarity, UMW leaders generally ignored the coal industry's peculiar forms of racial discrimination and exploitation. Communist miners, therefore, gained a small following within the union by protesting racial discrimination within the industry as well as in the union. The Party abandoned the dual-union policies characteristic of the NMU and created “rank-and-file committees” within the UMW. These committees raised issues that UMW leaders refused to address, including barriers to black occupational mobility and the lack of black participation in the union's bureaucracy. And while the UMW received praise from most black and white liberal observers, not to mention a few rank-and-file Communists, for its unequivocal racial egalitarianism, most local and national Communist leaders believed the union did not go far enough. Even the UMW's longstanding policy of preserving the offices of vice-president and recording secretary for blacks, and president and executive secretary for whites, was attacked by a few Party theoreticians as another form of segregation because it limited blacks to designated positions and kept them from holding the union's top offices. One Communist writer, social scientist and novelist Myra Page, discovered during her tour of Alabama's coal mines in 1934 that blacks comprised only one-third of state convention delegates, yet they made up the majority of union membership. As one white UMW official told her, “We give niggers one out of three on committees, keep ‘em satisfied and white man control [*sic*].” Nevertheless, most black Communists who toiled in the mines for a living were not as quick to criticize the union, especially since blacks served as treasurers in several locals, and in a few cases became checkweighmen once workers won the right to elect their own.¹⁹

The rank-and-file committees continued to push UMWA leadership to adopt more egalitarian racial policies, but early in 1934 another issue caused even greater internal dissension within the union: William Mitch accepted the NRA's minimum wage code, which paid Southern workers less than Northern workers. Southern coal operators rationalized lower wages by arguing that unusually high freight rates and the lower grade of Alabama coal pushed production costs relatively high. The regional wage differential sparked a militant, Communist-led opposition movement within the UMWA only months after its resuscitation, culminating in an unauthorized strike in February. Defying the decisions of the NRA Regional Labor Board and the UMWA, an estimated fifteen to twenty thousand miners walked off their jobs demanding higher wages, union recognition, and the abolition of the wage differential. When Mitch ordered the miners back to work, the Communist unit at the Lewisburg mine responded by calling for greater rank-and-file control and adding demands that drew attention to the most exploitative aspects of the miner's life and work. Party leaflets littered the mining camps advocating, among other things, a basic day rate of one dollar above the prevailing NRA code, a minimum tonnage rate, equal work and unfettered occupational mobility for black miners, an eight-hour day, free transportation to and from work, and a drastic reduction in commissary prices. Mitch temporarily settled the strike on March 16, but the strikers had to agree to limit union recognition to a voluntary checkoff system, freeze all strikes until April 1, 1935, and accept prevailing wages. Nevertheless, the negotiations resulted in two significant concessions—the abolition of the contracting system and the right of workers to elect checkweighmen.²⁰

The uneasy peace between coal operators and the UMWA did not last very long. In a surprising move, the NRA raised the minimum wage for Southern bituminous coal miners by \$1.20, nearly equalizing the Northern-based minimum, but following a federal injunction obtained by Alabama coal operators, the code was reduced to a forty-cent raise. Consequently, the operators rejected the modified code as well, thus provoking some fourteen thousand coal miners to walk off their jobs in April against William Mitch's wishes. Communists convinced workers at Docena and Hamilton Slope mines to leave their jobs, organized pickets at the TCI-owned Wylam and Edgewater mines, and led a group of steel workers to Republic Steel's captive coal mines and persuaded miners there to join the strike. In addition to protesting the wage differential, the Party called for an end to the operators' practice of deducting relief payments and back rent from the miners' paychecks, thus drawing attention to the links between housing and welfare policies and workers' dependence on the

company. The April walkout marked the height of Party influence in the Alabama coal fields—a fact that did not escape the attention of William Mitch. He not only blamed “radical elements” for instigating the unauthorized strike but encouraged UMW officials to work with company police to keep Communists out of the mines. The strike was eventually broken and most of the strikers either returned to work or were promptly fired.²¹

The Party exercised even greater influence within the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers, a union comprised mainly of iron ore miners and a handful of steel workers. Originally an outgrowth of the Western Federation of Miners, a militant union that helped launch the IWW in 1905, Mine Mill developed a national reputation as a radical, left-wing union during the 1930s. The prominent role Communists played in Mine Mill can be partially attributed to the fact that, in 1933, 80 percent of the district's ore miners, and an even greater percentage of the union, were black. Indeed, black workers—many of whom had gained experience in the Communist-led unemployed movement—held the majority of middle- and low-level leadership positions within the union. George Lemley, whose father was an organizer for Mine Mill, recalled, “When the union went in, some blacks thought they would rule the company. Everything will go our way.”²²



“Meat for the Buzzards!” Cartoon depicting the National Recovery Act's

When Jim Lipscomb, a Bessemer lawyer and former miner blacklisted for union activities, initiated Mine Mill's organizing drive in 1933, the prevalence of black workers and the union's egalitarian goals gave the movement an air of civil rights activism. Union meetings were held in the woods, in sympathetic black churches, or anywhere else activists could meet without molestation. Company police used violence and intimidation in an effort to crush Mine Mill before it could establish a following, but when these tactics failed, officials exploited racial animosities. TCI created a company union, the ERP, which used racist and anti-Communist slogans to appeal to white workers. Mine Mill quickly earned the nom de guerre "nigger union," and white workers who repudiated the ERP were labeled "communists" and "nigger lovers." Officials also cut social welfare programs and enforced segregation codes much more stringently than before.²³

In addition to building rank-and-file committees, some Communists were elected to leadership positions within their local. As one Mine Mill organizer explained in 1934, the Party had "even greater influence and stronger organization among the ore miners" than any other industry. Communists were frequently identified openly at union meetings, and in many cases, earned the endearment of black union members because of the Party's commitment to racial equality and civil rights. High-ranking white Mine Mill officials, on the other hand, shared mainstream labor leaders' disdain for Communists. Leaders of the Brighton local, for example, endorsed a resolution that read, "We are opposed to and do not tolerate Communism, and will not accept the application of any man for membership, who is tainted with its poison." A few months later, the president of Bessemer's Local 1 expelled white Communist John Davis and two black Communists, Nathan Strong and Ed Sears, solely because of their political affiliations.²⁴

Prodded by the rank-and-file committees, local Mine Mill leaders issued a strike call in May 1934 to ore miners at TCI, Republic Steel Corporation, the Sloss-Sheffield Iron and Steel Company, and the Woodward Iron Company demanding higher wages, shorter hours, and union recognition. The companies refused to arbitrate and responded by firing and evicting dozens of union members. Violence between strikers and company police left two strike breakers dead and at least nine workers wounded. Despite the intervention of state troops, bombs exploded and gunfire was exchanged intermittently throughout most of the summer.²⁵

During the strike, Communists devoted most of their energy to publicizing antiunion violence in the ore mines, fighting evictions, and securing relief for the strikers. Communists created miniature unemployed committees within Mine Mill that were instrumental in preventing several evictions, fighting for the strikers' right to receive public relief, and maintaining picket lines. In Bessemer, Clyde Johnson obtained much needed assistance for striking miners from the city's relief authorities and secured crucial support from the otherwise conservative Bessemer Central Trades and Labor Council.²⁶

With the intervention of Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, an agreement between Mine Mill and TCI was finally reached on June 27, though it was hardly a victory for the union. Mine Mill remained unrecognized, and wages increased only slightly. The Communists not only found the bargain unacceptable but pointed to blatant examples of antiunion discrimination and numerous instances of company noncompliance with the agreement. At the Raimund mine, for example, only 60 percent of the strikers were rehired while the other 40 percent were summarily fired and evicted. Party units at Muscoda mine adopted the slogan, "No Union Miners Move—All Scabs off Red Mountain," and Communists active at a Sloss-Sheffield mine threatened to lead an unauthorized strike over the same issue.²⁷

Mine Mill also led a small strike of steel workers at Republic Steel Corporation. Urged on by the Communist Party unit in Republic's East Thomas blast furnace, an estimated four hundred workers walked off their jobs in April and demanded a flat 20 percent wage increase and union recognition. A handful of Communists in Mine Mill attempted to extend the strike by marching on Sayreton coal mine in order to persuade the captive miners to join them, but they were intercepted by a squadron of company police. Vance Houdlitch, a young white steel worker, was gunned down, and Communist Mark Ellis was badly beaten. The Republic strikers eventually won an employee representation election conducted by the Atlanta Regional (NRA) Labor Board one month later; but the company would not recognize the union, and the NRA did not have the power to enforce the ruling. Consequently, the Thomas blast furnace workers remained on strike for over a year, receiving far more criticism than support from organized labor.²⁸

Besides some feeble attempts on the part of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers, the dying craft union that had been temporarily reinvigorated by the NRA, the steel industry in the Birmingham district remained unorganized until the CIO came into being a few years later. Through the use of lockouts, company unions, intimidation, and the exploitation of racial divisions within

the labor force, Birmingham's steel industry effectively hindered labor organization in the mills. The Communists placed much of the blame squarely on the shoulders of Amalgamated's local leadership, particularly its president, W. H. Crawford. Crawford opposed rank-and-file sentiment to join the 1934 strike wave, denounced the Republic Steel strike, and all but ignored black workers. Communist labor organizers agreed that the union's success depended on black workers who, in 1930, made up 47 percent of the labor force in Birmingham's steel and iron industries.²⁹

Rather than wait for a policy change in Amalgamated, Communists sought to organize metal workers autonomously by establishing federal locals chartered through the AFL's national headquarters. Clyde Johnson was instrumental in forming federal locals in four shops, three of which signed collective agreements with their employers. At the Virginia Bridge and Iron Company, Johnson struck a bargain with employers only after leading a dramatic one-day walkout and plant shutdown. At the Central Foundry in Tuscaloosa, Communists chartered a federal local with over five hundred workers after the segregated International Molders Union denied membership to black and unskilled white labor.³⁰

The Communists certainly made their presence felt among miners and steel workers during the 1934 strike wave. Yet their actual contribution remained essentially behind the scenes, partly because most union Communists were black, unskilled, rank-and-file workers. Although individuals such as Henry O. Mayfield, Joe Howard, and Ebb Cox would rise within the ranks of the CIO during the late 1930s, the majority of blacks—Communist or not—had few opportunities for advancement within the labor movement. Another, often overlooked reason for the Party's behind-the-scenes role in the 1934 strikes stems from the fact that many rank-and-file organizers were the wives and daughters of black industrial workers, and/or they were women who had joined the CP through the neighborhood relief committees. With the open encouragement of the rank-and-file committees, women's auxiliaries were formed in virtually all working-class communities. Frequently led by Communists or ILD activists, the women's auxiliaries sometimes rivaled union locals in membership as well as in their strident advocacy of labor organization. The growth and radicalization of the women's auxiliaries were certainly linked to the increasing work load of black women in the company-controlled communities—induced, of course, by cutbacks in wages and hours. Henry O. Mayfield recalled that whenever union members failed to recruit a recalcitrant worker, the women “would send a committee to talk with the worker's wife or the worker and they would always win their point.” One white coal miner suggested that the presence of black

women ensured the union's success. "Not a scab gets by 'em," he observed. "Just let one of their race try it. Why, their women folks handle *him!*" Workers' wives used a number of methods to "handle" their menfolk, such as withholding labor and sex, which might be described as a kind of "domestic strike." In a telling commentary, one ex-ore miner explains: "Womens can just about rule mens, you know things like that, to keep them from going back to the company or something another like that. 'Cause all of them was union. A man got a wife, and if he going back to the company [and] she didn't want him to go, then she'll say, 'If you go back, then me and you ain't going to be husband and wife no more.'" The women's auxiliaries also provided crucial material support during strikes. Ironically, the gardens women cultivated with the encouragement of the company, ultimately intended to offset wage reductions, became a source of strikers' relief. Coal miner Cleatus Burns remembers several strikes during which union members "would give sweet potatoes, corn, and . . . anything out the garden that they had." When the gardens proved inadequate, according to Mayfield, "the women would organize into groups and take baskets and go into stores asking for food for needy families."³¹

The disturbances in the coal, iron, and steel industries represented merely the apex of a year-long labor revolt. In February, nearly 1,500 Birmingham laundry workers struck for wage increases; 250 packinghouse workers walked off their jobs in May; and wildcat strikes, some of which had been coordinated by Communist organizers, exploded on several New Deal relief projects. Alabama also felt the impact of the West Coast waterfront strikes, which drew a few hundred Mobile longshoremen into the fray, and some 23,000 Alabama textile workers joined the national textile strike. In all, the state experienced at least 45 strikes involving 84,228 workers during the tumultuous year of 1934.³²

In spite of the Party's emphasis on industrial unionism, Alabama Communists did not entirely withdraw from organizing relief workers and the unemployed. In Tarrant City, an industrial suburb of Birmingham, the Party founded the RWL in 1934. Led by white Communist C. Dave Smith, a veteran labor organizer and dynamic speaker who, according to Clyde Johnson, "had guts and was quick with his fists," the RWL was quite popular among Tarrant City workers and even enjoyed support from Mayor Roy Ingram. Mainly through the work of Smith, Clyde Johnson, and local Communists Penny Parker and Jesse Owens, Tarrant City became the Party's strongest base of white working-class support.³³

Communists tried to organize black relief workers in the CCC, a New Deal agency created to relieve poverty and train youth in forest

conservation work. From the outset, protests over the working and living conditions were commonplace in the segregated camps, and several CCC workers were placed “under observation” for allegedly spreading “damaging propaganda.” In February 1934, a few YCL activists organized a strike of about two hundred black CCC workers in a camp near Tuscaloosa. What began as a peaceful protest erupted into violence when state troops intervened and strikers retaliated with a barrage of bricks. Once the fighting subsided, CCC authorities promptly fired about 160 workers and had YCL activist Boykin Queenie, the strike's leader, arrested. The Communist Party, along with the discharged strikers, issued a statement demanding Queenie's immediate release.³⁴

Communists played no significant part in the Alabama textile strike. Because the Party had not organized in Huntsville, the heart of the state's textile industry, the district committee sent “flying squadrons” of organizers that drove through mill towns at night and littered the area with leaflets. Aside from sloganeering, the Party made no sustained effort to organize the Alabama textile mills. Besides, its predominantly black cadre would have had a difficult time trying to convince white, often racist textile workers to cast their lot with the Communists. Not surprisingly, the Communists could only claim “considerable influence among the Negro textile workers” in Birmingham.³⁵

On the Gulf Coast, the Party's diminutive role can be attributed to its size and to workers' reluctance to join the waterfront strike. Communists only began organizing in Mobile in August 1934, two months before the strike. In response to the West Coast waterfront strike, the Communist-led MWIU created a Joint Strike Preparations Committee with support from the ISU and a few active members of the nearly defunct IWW. On the eve of the walkout, the committee convinced the ILA in Mobile to join the strike, raising the total number of strikers to a minuscule four hundred workers, but after three days the ISU and ILA called their members back to work. William McGee, president of the MWIU in Mobile, criticized the unions' turnabout on the strike decision and organized a mass rally of about one hundred black and white seamen, but police dispersed the crowd before the rally began.³⁶

Although the Party's role in the 1934 strike wave was uneven and often insignificant, opponents attributed practically every action associated with worker rebellion to the CP. Birmingham newspapers carried headlines such as “Strike Moves Near Climax,” “Reds Linked with Violence,” and “Outbreak Believed Work of Agitators.”³⁷ Ironically, *Daily Worker* reports confirmed the fears of many

Birmingham residents by exaggerating the Party's role and, in an odd way, by attracting radical artists and intellectuals from outside Alabama. The outsiders' brief forays to Birmingham—which usually included a day with the SCU—resembled artists' sojourns to the front during the Spanish Civil War. They wanted to witness firsthand the heroism of Dixie's interracial vanguard, and those who experienced police repression or harassment wore their stripes proudly. Among them were luminaries such as playwright and novelist John Howard Lawson, authors Jack Conroy, Myra Page, and Grace Lumpkin, and visual artist Paul Weller—most of whom used the experiences or knowledge they obtained in Alabama in their work.³⁸

The Party's strong showing at the 1934 May Day demonstration, which coincided with the most intense period of strike activity, fueled the notion that Communists provoked the unrest. The Party's first major rally since the May Day debacle of the previous year attracted over five thousand people to Capitol Park, despite the city commission's last-minute revocation of a parade permit. Police prepared for the event by mounting machine guns atop the Jefferson County jail and enlisting the support of approximately fifteen hundred White Legionnaires. Before the speakers could address the crowd, police officers and Legionnaires began beating and arresting protesters.³⁹

Under orders from Birmingham police chief E. L. Hollums, officers launched a wave of retaliatory raids several days after the demonstration, jailing nearly a dozen Communists on charges ranging from vagrancy to criminal anarchy. The first wave of arrestees, comprised primarily of local leaders and known visitors, included Louise Thompson, a black International Workers' Order representative visiting from New York. The incarceration of renowned radical playwright John Howard Lawson, who was charged with libel for his *Daily Worker* article describing the arrests and trials of six Birmingham Communist leaders, attracted national attention to civil liberties violations in Birmingham. The wave of repression even piqued the ACLU's interest, particularly after Birmingham's Western Union office manager refused to transmit two dispatches from a *Daily Worker* correspondent because he found them to be “highly inflammatory.”⁴⁰

While the sensationalist claims of the press were more invention than reality, they had the effect of promoting the Communist Party from mere nuisance to Birmingham's number one public enemy in the minds of many. For their growing popularity the Communists had to bear the brunt of antilabor violence. The “Red Squad,” a special unit of the Birmingham police department headed by detective J. T. Moser, became a beehive of activity. Although police had both the 1930

criminal anarchy ordinance and vagrancy laws at their disposal, the Red Squad more commonly invoked section 4902 of the Birmingham criminal code because it allowed police, without a warrant, to arrest and detain anyone for up to seventy-two hours without charge. Section 4902 was used to obtain information and/or to intimidate activists without having to go to court.⁴¹ Clyde Johnson, who had been arrested by the Birmingham police force at least three times in 1934, was severely beaten while being held incommunicado.

At first I didn't think they were interested in me answering questions because they'd ask a question, and if I didn't respond quickly enough . . . they started beating the living hell out of me, on my head. And then they'd make me put my hands on the table, and they started pounding at my hands. They broke a couple of fingers. They kept at this and I didn't answer. I decided they were going to kill me. ... I went unconscious, and they threw water at me, and I went through it some more. [When] they picked me up I was barely able to walk.⁴²

Black Communist Helen Longs was arrested for distributing leaflets explaining the Party's election platform. Although the charge was eventually reduced to "disorderly conduct," the police detained her under section 4902 and proceeded with their peculiar form of interrogation:

Three of them had rubber hoses, one had [a] strap . . . and one had a blackjack. The biggest one of the men tried to make me lie down but I wouldn't. Then they hit me with the hose and with the strap with such force as almost to knock me down but when I didn't fall the biggest man finally grabbed me and threw me down. . . . While they had me on the floor one of them would beat me until he got tired and then another would start in. Then two or three would beat me at the same time until I nearly lost consciousness.⁴³

The Red Squad stepped up its activities during the summer, jailing dozens of Communists charged with violating the criminal anarchy ordinance. In July, police arrested Israel Berlin for possessing Party literature, and a few days later he was jailed again, along with Communists John Beidel and Fred Keith, when police seized the entire

August edition of the *Southern Worker*. Editor Elizabeth Lawson retaliated by putting out a special six-page edition of the *Southern Worker* and sending a complimentary copy to police chief Hollums. In August, police raided the home of sixty-six-year-old Addie Adkins and discovered twenty-five thousand leaflets appealing to workers to support the textile strike. Adkins was arrested and charged with distributing literature “advocating overthrow of the government by force.” In nearly all of these cases, however, the charges were dismissed by judges who ruled that Party literature did not violate the criminal anarchy ordinance.⁴⁴

Frustrated by the criminal anarchy ordinance's ineffectiveness, police chief Hollums and city commissioner W. O. Downs promoted much stronger anti-Communist legislation. In May the commissioner drafted the infamous “Downs literature ordinance,” which made it unlawful to possess one or more copies of “radical” literature, defined to include any antiwar or antifascist material, labor publications, and liberal journals such as the *New Republic* and the *Nation*. The maximum sentence for violating the ordinance was six months in jail plus a fine of \$100. The Birmingham City Commission adopted the ordinance in October, and the city council of Bessemer passed a similar antisedition law one month later.⁴⁵

Although AFL leaders were well aware that antisedition laws could be used against organized labor, they did not protest the legislation. On the contrary, the Birmingham and Bessemer trades councils not only championed the new ordinances but called for even stronger measures. Robert Moore, president of the ASFL, felt the Downs ordinance still was not restrictive enough to deal with the threat of Communism. “We have no adequate laws in Alabama,” he announced, “to meet the constantly increasing threat from this source, but we can oust every known Communist from within the ranks of organized labor, and we propose to do just that.” W. O. Hare, secretary of the ASFL, followed Moore's advice and attempted to expel Communists and “questionable characters” from the federation.⁴⁶

With the passage of the Downs ordinance the number of arrests rose dramatically, but as with the criminal anarchy ordinance preceding it, convictions were few and far between. Of sixty arrests in less than a year, only three resulted in convictions under the new law.⁴⁷ Where due process failed, extralegal terrorist organizations succeeded. The White Legion directed virtually all of its energies toward fighting Communism, from distributing propaganda to burning crosses on the lawns of white Tarrant City Communists. In Birmingham, the Klan which had declined substantially in the late 1920s, rode the crest of antilabor and anti-Communist sentiment in

1934. In that same year, forty-four new Klaverns were organized in northern Alabama alone, and a local fascist movement affiliated with the Klan began publishing the Alabama *Black Shirt*. The Klan's rebirth was signaled by the appearance of thousands of leaflets warning Birmingham's blacks to stay clear of the Communists.⁴⁸

The parades, literature, and other symbolic gestures were intended to intimidate activists as well as to build support among whites, but these public displays of white supremacy failed to silence Alabama radicals. Indeed, black ILD organizers occasionally responded with their own leaflets, such as the one warning: "KKK! The Workers Are Watching You!!" The vigilantes' real influence lay in extralegal acts of violence, usually perpetrated with the assistance of local law enforcement agencies. The number of vigilante assaults on Communists and suspected Communists rose rapidly during the strike wave and continued well into 1935. In the aftermath of the ore miners' strike, Clyde Johnson survived at least three assassination attempts. Black Communist Steve Simmons suffered a near-fatal beating at the hands of Klansmen in North Birmingham, and a few months later his black comrade in Bessemer, Saul Davis, was kidnapped by a gang of white TCI employees, stripped bare, and flogged for several hours. These examples represent only a fraction of the antiradical terror that pervaded the Birmingham district in 1934.⁴⁹

As 1934 came to a close, district organizer Nat Ross and secretary Ted Wellman felt the time had come to take stock of the past in order to chart a new direction for the future. Wellman observed in a *Daily Worker* article that the Communists' role in the strikes, compounded by the fact that they had suffered an inordinate amount of retaliatory violence, earned them the admiration and support of many industrial workers. He even admitted that Birmingham's working class "in many cases pushed the Party members into activity by asking for leaflets, and for information about meetings and activities." Yet, in the Party's theoretical journals and internal organs, Wellman and Ross were far less effusive with their praise. Both submitted reports criticizing the Birmingham cadre for failing to build mine and shop units in the most important centers of industry and for expending all their energy on organizing the strikes instead of recruiting and educating industrial workers. In Nat Ross's words, they "did not sufficiently explain the connection between the struggle against the differential wage and the struggle of the share-croppers, and between the struggle for the freedom of the Scottsboro Boys and the whole fight for the right to self-determination in the Black Belt." All writers agreed, however, that the level of repression hindered the Party's work.⁵⁰

Ironically, the proliferation of antiradical violence in 1934 seemed

to act as a catalyst for the Party's growth. Like many others who joined in

NEGROES BEWARE DO NOT ATTEND COMMUNIST MEETINGS

Paid organizers for the communists are only trying to get negroes in trouble. Alabama is a good place for good negroes to live in, but it is a bad place for negroes who believe in SOCIAL EQUALITY.

The Ku Klux Klan Is Watching You. TAKE HEED

Tell the communist leaders to leave.
Report all communist meetings to the

Ku Klux Klan
Post Office Box 651, Birmingham, Alabama.

Anti-Communist handbill distributed by the Ku Klux Klan in Birmingham in the 1930s (Labor Defender)

1934, Jesse G. Owens, a onetime Socialist from Tarrant City, interpreted the violence as proof that the Communists "must have something that was for the good of the working class." According to Party sources, three hundred new members joined during the intense six-week period of labor activity beginning in April 1934, and by May the Communists claimed one thousand in the Birmingham district

alone while the ILD's ranks swelled to three thousand.⁵¹ More significant than the numbers, however, is the fact that violence compelled local Communists to make antiradical repression and the denial of civil liberties a central issue on their agenda. The emphasis on police repression and violence was not only evident in the assessments offered by Nat Ross and Ted Wellman, but subtle changes in the Party's entire program became apparent during the 1934 election campaign. As in 1933, the Party ran candidates associated with organized labor, but the issue of civil liberties took precedence over everything else on the Party's platform. Insisting that the KKK, the White Legion, and other "armed fascist bands" be outlawed, the Communists held a demonstration in front of the Birmingham courthouse to demand the right to vote without any restrictions whatsoever. When the city commission turned down their application for a permit to hold an election rally in Capitol Park, the Communists organized several smaller rallies "in the naborhoods [*sic*] and sections of the city ... in order to avoid police and fascist violence." The right of free speech and assembly became a campaign priority, articulated as a basic right denied all working people: "The Communist party will grow stronger every day and will soon TAKE ITS CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHT to speak to the people openly on the streets in the public places of the city."⁵²

While it is impossible to accurately measure the Party's influence in the labor movement, it is clear that the Communists' impact was far greater than their numbers indicate. They operated as the proverbial gadflies, criticizing AFL policies; popularizing strikes through publications, leaflets, and pickets; and convincing small groups of workers, including a handful of whites, of the virtues of socialism. Indeed, the Communist-led rank-and-file committees were the only organized voices within the Alabama labor movement to consistently fight against racial discrimination and to build alliances between strikers in different industries. But the more they asserted themselves in the 1934 strike wave, the greater the intensity of antiradical violence and the more difficult it became for them to work openly. Unlike the neighborhood relief committees or the unemployed councils, which were organized and run by Communists, the labor movement's relationship to the Party was ambivalent, to say the least. Surrounded by hostile trade union leaders, Communists had to perform the unenviable task of building a base of support while operating as outsiders.

Their difficulties were compounded by the fact that they were not merely anonymous outsiders, but outsiders with a volatile reputation. Their activities in the courtrooms and on the streets on behalf of poor black men accused of rape and other assorted crimes followed the

Communists into the workplace and the relief offices. In a word, Alabama Communists operated under the shadow of Scottsboro—a shadow that generated as much vicious hatred as unqualified respect. It is to this shadow that we shall now turn.

Chapter Four: In the Heart of the Trouble

Race, Sex, and the ILD

“I reckon you take up for those Roosians. Talk about lynching. That whole country ought to be lynched . . . making women public property! . . . The Roosian Reds had better not come over here trying to nationalize my daughter.”

—*Grace Lumpkin, A Sign for Cain*

We wish to call your attention to the inroads being made among people of this City and State, white and colored, by insidious propaganda of Communism, which we are being looked to curb and do propose to combat and destroy, in keeping with the spirit of our Organization, but find ourselves handicapped on every hand because the “Red Propagandist” uses the very things herein pointed out, to attract followers and to create disrespect for law and order, and to incite Mob[s] and Mob violence, which we know to be futile and destructive to the best interest [*sic*] of our people.

—*Birmingham NAACP Petition to City Commission, 1933*

On March 25, 1931, nine black men, ages thirteen to nineteen, were pulled from a locomotive boxcar and arrested near Paint Rock, Alabama, for allegedly assaulting some young white men who were also “riding the rails.” When authorities discovered two white women, Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, riding on the same train, the charge against the alleged assailants was promptly changed to rape, even though none of the black men shared the same boxcar as the women. Indicted without benefit of legal counsel, the nine defendants were taken to nearby Scottsboro and held in the Jackson County jail. Although no evidence of rape was introduced by the prosecution, the Scottsboro Boys were tried, convicted, and sentenced to death within three days.¹

In light of the South's record of injustice to blacks, the speed with which the all-white jury handed down its decision should not be surprising. However, Scottsboro stands out from any number of similar cases because the defendants received unsolicited outside assistance from the Communist-led ILD. As soon as word of the arrests

reached local newspapers, ILD officials located the defendants' families in Chattanooga, offered legal services, and made preparations to publicize the case. The ILD's strategy was to focus international attention on what would have been a quiet, soon forgotten trial. On April 12, thirteen thousand people assembled in Cleveland to protest the "Scottsboro Frame-up," and on the following day nearly twenty thousand demonstrators in New York demanded the immediate release of the nine defendants. Within the next few weeks, Scottsboro defense committees were formed, demonstrations were organized, and telegrams and letters of protest from across the country flooded Governor Benjamin Miller's office.²

The ILD entered a far more taxing and complex battle than its leaders had ever imagined. Its offer of free legal counsel and active public support for alleged "Negro rapists" was not only seen as a direct assault on white womanhood; from the outset the ILD was tainted by a peculiar myth that linked Communism to sexual promiscuity and miscegenation. In the South the word *communism* itself (pronounced "com-mune-ism," according to W. J. Cash) had a curiously explicit sexual connotation derived from stereotyped visions of nineteenth-century Utopian communal societies, which suggested that notions of "free love" were integrally tied to communal living. Moreover, the presence of white women in an organization with an even larger proportion of black men spurred Southern white imaginations. The Birmingham *Labor Advocate* warned its readers to beware of outside agitators who, "under the cover of darkness," disseminated "Red literature preaching free love [and] inter marriage." The presumed promiscuity of female Communists—black or white—became an axiom in Alabama, especially after Scottsboro. While confined to a Birmingham jail cell in 1932, Alice Burke had to endure sordid remarks from police officers who insisted that she desired to sleep with all nine Scottsboro defendants. "Everybody knew," she recalled amusingly, "that I was a lover of blacks." Two years later, black Communist Louise Thompson was handled in a similar manner in a Birmingham courtroom. During cross-examination, both the prosecuting attorney and the judge "were inclined at first to make a joke of the affairs, taunting me about 'my comrades,' slyly alluding to some intimate relationship with the men arrested with me."³

The belief that Communists intended to make women public property, available to all irrespective of race, served as a powerful buffer against Communism. Black men, it was suggested over and over again, were drawn to Communism because it meant having access to the dominant society's greatest treasure—white women. Wrote one observer, "In the eyes of Coloured men, complete equality with the

Whites, as proclaimed by Moscow, *means free possession of White women.*” Some of the Party's detractors even suggested that the Communists planned to wage a sexual revolution alongside the class struggle. During the 1934 strike wave the Birmingham White Legion issued leaflets asking white citizens, “How would you like to awaken one morning to find your wife or daughter attacked by a Negro or a Communist!” Two white Alabamians underscored this point in a popular 1936 polemic aptly titled *Scottsboro: The Firebrand of Communism*. Echoing popular racist notions equating savagery with sexual lasciviousness, they argued that Communists aimed their propaganda at the black man “with the hope that it will ignite the spark of savagery that once controlled the instincts of his ancestors.”⁴

The ILD's presence aroused an equally passionate, though much different, response from black Alabamians. The Party had already built a strong base of support within black working-class communities because of its relief campaign, but once the ILD entered the Scottsboro case, the CP quickly earned a reputation as a “race” organization. Although the move grew out of a pre-existing policy to defend all “class war prisoners,” the ILD suddenly found itself immersed in the world of race politics. Through their participation in the Scottsboro defense as well as a panoply of local cases involving poor black defendants, ILD activists directly challenged the leadership of Birmingham's black elite.

Once Scottsboro hit the daily newspapers, Birmingham's traditional black leaders at first dissociated themselves from the case and berated the Communists for meddling in Southern affairs. The *Birmingham World*, in an editorial entitled “Cast Down Your Buckets Where You Are!,” supported Alabama's legal system 100 percent. “Birmingham,” the writer explained, “has proved [*sic*] that a man can get a just and fair trial in the Southland regardless of color.” While questioning the evidence presented in court, Oscar Adams, editor of the black *Birmingham Reporter*, nevertheless felt the defendants’ testimony carried little weight because they were “poorly trained, [and] primitive when we think of intelligence.” NAACP national secretary Walter White also expressed some skepticism at first. Adopting a wait-and-see attitude, he did not send a lawyer to Alabama until the nine defendants had been convicted. White questioned the ILD's intentions, suggesting that the organization was interested less in the defendants’ welfare than in revolution as ordered from Moscow. Furthermore, he believed the ILD duped the parents into accepting its support since the defendants’ families were, in White's words, “of humble background and with meager educational and other advantages.”⁵

White nevertheless recognized that black public opinion was

beginning to shift toward the ILD. He had hoped to wrest control of the case from the ILD, but the paralyzed state of the NAACP in Alabama and the overall timorousness of Birmingham's black elite precluded any local intervention. One month after the first trial, national director of branches Robert Bagnall partly blamed the Birmingham branch for the NAACP's failure to enter the case, suggesting that if local organization had been stronger the Scottsboro case "might have received instant attention." In January 1931, the Birmingham branch claimed a total paid membership of six—a figure that included all of Jefferson County. Independent efforts failed as well. Two years earlier, Oscar Adams and members of the black business community had established the Birmingham Benevolent and Legal Aid Association "to enable progressive and forward-looking Negroes of substantial worth to assist the less fortunate and underprivileged Negro to get a hearing in court." After a few sparsely attended meetings, however, the organization had disbanded, leaving a dying NAACP and several well-attended social and literary clubs in its wake.⁶

The black elite's ambivalence, timidity, and organizational weakness contrasted sharply with the Party's growing strength and quixotic approach to politics. Almost a year before Scottsboro, the Party launched a regional antilynching campaign that had been motivated by a multiple lynching in Emelle, Alabama. On July 4, 1930, Tom Robertson, a black sharecropper and reputed racial militant, was attacked by vigilantes following an argument he had had with a local white storekeeper over the price of a battery. While most of the small-town folks of Emelle were celebrating American Independence Day, a mob gathered at Robertson's home. Tom Robertson tried his best to stave off the attack with buckshot, but once he ran out of ammunition, the mob broke down his door and lynched four members of his family. He and the rest of his relatives then became game in a rapacious manhunt (inspired by a \$300 reward offered by Alabama governor Bibb Graves) that ended only when Robertson was captured two months later. The ILD publicized the case, but it did not have the resources to provide Robertson legal counsel. He died in the electric chair on January 2, 1931.⁷

The events in Emelle, Alabama, became a catalyst for the revival of the ANLC, a Communist auxiliary whose support had been declining steadily since its founding in 1925. A preliminary meeting held in Chattanooga in October attracted an enthusiastic crowd, and a few weeks later over 120 delegates, including Southern Garveyites, gathered in St. Louis to attend an ANLC-sponsored National Anti-Lynching Convention. From this particular meeting a new organization developed, the LSNR, to replace the dying ANLC and to

reinvigorate the fight against lynching.⁸ The Party's response to the Scottsboro arrests, therefore, grew directly from these events. By December 1930, ILD leaders not only placed antilynching activity high on their list of priorities but now began to define virtually all African-Americans falsely accused of capital offenses as "class war prisoners."

As the local NAACP tried in vain to win over the Scottsboro defendants, Birmingham ILD activists took up other local cases. In April 1931, the Party, the ILD, and the newly created LSNR chapter protested the police shooting of an unarmed black man, "Babe" Dawes. A suspect in a recent shooting in Birmingham, Dawes reportedly complied with police orders but was gunned down nonetheless. Two months later, the ILD protested the lynching of Thomas Jasper in Huntsville, Alabama, but demands for a full investigation and the death penalty for his murderers did not result in a single prosecution.⁹

These local cases were rarely publicized outside the Communist press, and even the CP tabloids paid more attention to the Scottsboro case. But by late summer 1931, a case involving a black man accused of raping and murdering two prominent Birmingham white women nearly rivaled Scottsboro as a cause célèbre in Alabama and further intensified local conflict between the ILD and the NAACP. On August 4, 1931, sisters Nell and Augusta Williams and a friend, Jennie Wood, were driving through Shades Valley, just beyond the Birmingham city limits, when a black man reportedly leapt upon the automobile's running board and forced the driver at gunpoint to take a back road to a wooded area, where all three were allegedly robbed and then raped. When Nell Williams attempted to disarm their assailant, he shot and killed Wood and injured the two sisters. Augusta Williams did not survive her injuries; she died in the hospital hours later, leaving Nell the sole survivor.¹⁰

Press reports tried to link the Communist Party to the assault after Nell Williams claimed that the three women were forced to listen to a lengthy harangue about "the race problem and Communism" after intercourse. Enraged white citizens and police launched a reign of terror against blacks in general and Birmingham Communists in particular. Several Communists, including district organizer Harry Jackson, were jailed within days of the shooting, and dozens of young black men were killed or wounded by police. According to Angelo Herndon, who was also arrested during the fracas, "lynch mobs rushed through the streets in the Negro sections of the town like maniacs." Black businesses in the suburb of Woodlawn were firebombed, and for

several weeks lights were shut off in black communities by 10:00 PM as part of the city-imposed curfew on African-Americans.¹¹ Fearing a potential race riot, Birmingham's traditional black leaders tried desperately to calm the white community. A black welfare organization released a statement impugning the "awful crime committed against womanhood by one of our race," and a group of black businessmen offered a \$3,300 reward for the capture of the Williamses' assailant. The Communists felt the reward was inappropriate and accused the black elite of "helping the white ruling class place the noose about the neck of some innocent Negro worker."¹²

The Shades Valley murders, following on the heels of the SCU's shoot-out at Camp Hill (see Chapter 2), compelled the CIC to investigate Communist activity in Alabama. In less than two weeks, a subcommittee composed of black and white clergy, educators, and liberal businessmen produced a slim report titled "Radical Activities in Alabama." Conceding that black working people were at the center of Party activity, the report maintained that blacks were merely dupes of white radicals endowed with "brilliant leadership, sleepless energy, and apparently unlimited money." "[Blacks'] ancient wrongs," the report explained, "their new hopes, their ignorance, and their trustful natures are counted on to make them readily responsive to the revolutionary appeal."¹³

About a month later, after the hysteria had died down and Nell Williams had recovered from the shooting, she and her brother Dent Williams spotted a black man, thirty-five-year-old Willie Peterson, walking along the sidewalk. When she identified him as the assailant, Dent Williams accosted Peterson with his pistol drawn and performed a citizen's arrest. Emphatically proclaiming his innocence, the thin, sickly, dark-skinned, Southern-born Willie Peterson did not in any way fit the original description given by Williams, who had described her attacker as a stout, light-skinned, educated Northerner. Moreover, several witnesses claimed they had seen Peterson on the other side of town when the crime was committed. It was so obvious Williams had chosen the wrong man that both the Jefferson County sheriff and the state solicitor privately admitted that a mistake had been made. To quell any doubt about Peterson's guilt, Dent Williams arranged a meeting with the sheriff at which his sister was supposed to make a positive identification. As soon as Peterson emerged from his cell, Dent drew a concealed pistol and shot him several times. Though he was already suffering from aggravated tuberculosis, Peterson miraculously survived the shooting.¹⁴

With very little solid evidence, the prosecution approached the case

from a different angle altogether. Amid press reports claiming the assailant “lectured” on Communism and the “race question” after raping the three women, the prosecution tried to link Willie Peterson to the Communists by invoking the sexual connotations associated with the popular image of Communism. Peterson's grueling interrogation while an inmate at Kilby prison is quite revealing on this score:

Q: You had been to meetings where they said the negroes were as good

as white people and ought to be treated like white people?

A: I don't remember. . . .

Q: You know what a communist is, don't you?

A: A Communist?

Q: The people going around preaching to negroes that they ought to take the stand that they are as good as white folks and that they ought to marry white folks.¹⁵

Dazed by the arrest and shooting of her husband, Henrietta Peterson immediately turned to the ILD. As ILD lawyers and activists began making plans for Peterson's defense, Birmingham NAACP leaders—prodded by Walter White—fought for control of the case. Once Henrietta Peterson's decision became public, NAACP secretary Charles McPherson persuaded her to disavow the ILD retainer she had signed and allow the NAACP to take the case. McPherson told her that the ILD was an illegal organization and that any mass campaign for Peterson's freedom “will make the white people in Birmingham mad.” “The people with whom you are dealing,” he warned, “believe in overthrowing the government. They do not care anything about your husband, they are using him as a pawn to get a foot hold in America. . . . You will be railroading your husband to the electric chair if you follow them.” Fearing for her husband's safety, she followed McPherson's advice and switched to a respectable Birmingham law firm, Roach and Johnson, and the NAACP promised to bear litigation costs.¹⁶

Although the first trial in December ended in a hung jury, Peterson was convicted of first-degree murder in a second trial in January 1932, on the strength of testimony from one “Henry Wilson.” Reputedly a black Tuscaloosa barber, Wilson testified that Peterson had bragged about the crime to everyone in his shop. When an investigator revealed that Wilson was actually Tom Sheppard, a construction worker who had been paid ten dollars to lie on the stand,

it made no difference. After less than twenty minutes of deliberation, Peterson was sentenced to die by electrocution.¹⁷

The Birmingham NAACP branch urged Roach and Johnson to appeal the case—a decision that augmented the association's popularity and revitalized the dwindling organization. Under Charles McPherson's leadership, the Birmingham branch convinced some prominent black clergy and professionals to establish a defense fund for Peterson. Now that the NAACP could boast of its own Scottsboro, McPherson acknowledged in February, “Birmingham is just about ripe for a rehabilitation.” Three months later, the same branch that only a year earlier could not achieve a quorum now counted ninety-seven paid-up members.¹⁸

The ILD's persistent mass campaign on Peterson's behalf proved to be a painful thorn in the side of the newly reconstituted NAACP. When the Birmingham *Post* published an article linking the two organizations as defenders of “Negro cases,” the local NAACP branch responded with a patriotic letter distancing itself from the ILD and claiming no connection whatsoever with the Scottsboro case. In fact, distinguishing itself from the ILD seemed to be the whole point of the Peterson campaign, with respect to politics. “The Communists,” Walter White complained to Roy Wilkins, “keep ballyhooing about [the Peterson] case, and we want to keep in the minds of the public that it is the NAACP and not the Communists who are fighting for him.” But the proliferation of Communist-led Peterson defense committees convinced large numbers of black Birmingham working people that the ILD was, in fact, leading the campaign.¹⁹

While the Peterson and Scottsboro cases found ample space in Communist and mainstream newspapers, another rape case occurred which escaped nearly everyone's attention. In May 1932, a twelve-year-old black Birmingham girl, Murdis Dixon, was hired by a white man who lived in the vicinity to perform domestic chores. When she arrived at his home, he forced her into a wooded section of the city and raped her at knifepoint. Witnesses came forward, but police refused to arrest the man and the case never went to trial. The Dixon case is illuminating for the conspicuous silence it evoked from leading white Communists, black middle-class spokespersons, and white liberals. Neither the NAACP, the CIC, nor the ILD investigated the matter, and Murdis Dixon's story never made it to the columns of mainstream Birmingham newspapers or the *Southern Worker*—only the Garveyite *Negro World* found a small space in its pages to report the incident. Only a small group of local black Communists took an interest in the case. Calling themselves the Liberation Committee, Al Murphy, Hosea Hudson, and Joe Burton sought support from black

clergy in order to pressure police into charging Dixon's assailant. However, traditional black spokesmen remained silent, and the Liberation Committee was unable to mobilize the kind of mass support Willie Peterson and the Scottsboro Nine enjoyed. Perhaps the indifference to Dixon's case can be partly attributed to the age-old double standard that cast white women as pure and virtuous and black women as naturally promiscuous. These notions apparently penetrated political practice to the point where the rape of a twelve-year-old black girl was ignored by the NAACP and the ILD in Birmingham.²⁰

As the summer approached and Murdis Dixon's rape tragically faded from memory, former Birmingham activist Angelo Herndon was added to the ILD's growing list of political prisoners. Herndon, who had recently been assigned to work among the Atlanta unemployed, was convicted of violating an old slave insurrection law for organizing an interracial relief demonstration.²¹ With the Scottsboro and Herndon cases achieving national prominence just before the 1932 election campaign, Southern ILD district organizer Donald Burke announced plans for an All-Southern Scottsboro and Civil Rights Conference to be held in Birmingham on October 2. In anticipation of the largest ILD gathering to date, several small preliminary mass meetings were held throughout the city, including an outdoor demonstration of two hundred at which Viola Montgomery, mother of Scottsboro defendant Olen Montgomery, gave the keynote speech. As local organizations prepared for the October 2 conference, Klansmen, vigilantes, and law enforcement agencies intensified antiradical repression. When black Communist organizer Otto Hall arrived from New York, he was arrested, beaten, and deposited outside the city limits. A few days later, Klansmen organized a twenty-car motorcade through the black community and distributed leaflets that read, "Communism Will Not Be Tolerated."²²

The All-Southern Scottsboro and Civil Rights Conference went on as scheduled in spite of police and Klan intimidation. Altogether some three hundred blacks and fifty whites packed the Negro Masonic Temple, and between five hundred and one thousand black residents were turned away for lack of space or because of the military atmosphere surrounding the hall. While the crowd listened to addresses by Communists Donald and Alice Burke, Mary Leonard, and "Uncle" Ben Fowler, a black ILD organizer and "jackleg preacher," about eighty police officers equipped with three machine guns and a box of tear gas bombs established posts across the street from the hall. As Hosea Hudson recalls, the people who attended the conference "all was in overalls and half-raggedy," but many appeared not to have been intimidated: "Negroes just walked all under them rifles, just went

on in the door and on to the meeting—had them standing on the corner too. People just walked on by.”²³

The response to the conference even surprised its organizers. Afterward, the Birmingham ILD office was suddenly flooded with volunteers, and soon its core of two or three dozen organizers burgeoned to two hundred active members. A local officer for the U.S. Military Intelligence Division woefully conceded late in 1932 that the ILD had “created a favorable impression among Negroes and some reports intimated that Negroes were becoming bolder in aligning themselves openly with the Communists.”²⁴

Birmingham Party leaders looked to take advantage of the ILD's growing popularity. Even before the Central Committee promoted broad-based, united front politics, local Communist leaders began to make overtures toward white liberals and traditional black leaders to unite around legal defense cases. A month after the Birmingham conference, district organizer Nat Ross suggested that a revitalized ILD composed of “non-revolutionary workers and middle class elements of all political and religious faiths” would be even more effective as long as “the Party gives close guidance.” Liberal and black middle-class spokespersons ignored Ross's invitation at first, but a string of unexpected circumstances created a new set of opportunities for joint action. Over a year before the new Scottsboro trials opened on March 27, 1933, one of the alleged victims, Ruby Bates, repudiated the rape charge, admitting that she had been forced by police to lie. Yet, despite new evidence and a brilliant defense, the all-white Alabama jury found Haywood Patterson, the first defendant, guilty, and the judge sentenced him to die in the electric chair.²⁵

Patterson's conviction aroused considerable indignation among African-Americans. When the NAACP board of directors attributed the verdict to ILD tactics, Walter White and the association were attacked from all corners of the nation's black populace—local NAACP branches, newspaper editors, churches, and several radical organizations harshly criticized the association's national leadership. Practically overnight, the NAACP reversed its original statement and agreed to aid the ILD and raise money for the Scottsboro defense.²⁶

Birmingham branch leaders did not oppose reentering the Scottsboro case, but many cringed at the idea of working directly with the ILD. Critical of the decision, McPherson wrote to White, “I am afraid that the association has been too hasty to re-enter the Scottsboro cases without first working out a definite agreement with that rabied crowd. You see, coming as it does like a thunder-bolt out of a clear sky, it puts us in a bad plight right here in the heart of the trouble. I urge you that an agreeable working arrangement be

definitely formed separating the two organizations so as not to embarrass us.” Birmingham branch leaders immediately issued a press release explaining the NAACP’s sudden change of heart with respect to the ILD. Decrying the Party’s revolutionary goals and declaring their own patriotism in unambiguous terms (“We are American citizens, *Red, White and Blue*”), Birmingham NAACP leaders argued that intervention was necessary “for the purpose of controlling [*sic*] and restricting [the ILD’s] activities and propaganda to sane and *dignified methods in the future.*”²⁷

A few weeks before the NAACP announced its decision to establish ties with the ILD, a group of white liberals and clergymen founded the Birmingham Citizens Scottsboro Aid Committee. In defiance of city segregation ordinances, the committee held its first mass rally on March 31. Over one thousand people packed the First Congregational Church for the event, and when standing room was no longer available, according to one observer, “hundreds . . . remained milling outside.” The principal speakers included Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein of the Temple Beth Or in Montgomery; Dr. Kenneth E. Barnhart, a professor of sociology recently expelled from Birmingham-Southern College because of his political views; and Mrs. H. C. Bryant, president of the black YWCA in Birmingham. NAACP branch president E. W. Taggart made an unexpected—and unauthorized—appearance. To the chagrin of several coactivists, Taggart not only attended the meeting in defiance of branch orders but had advocated joint action with the ILD months before national leaders opted to do so. On Easter Sunday the Citizens Scottsboro Aid Committee held another successful mass meeting in Birmingham, but this time the Party’s presence was far more evident. Speeches by Jane Speed, Mary Leonard, and Scottsboro mother Ada Wright emphasized the ILD’s contribution to both the Scottsboro and Peterson cases and challenged the Citizens Scottsboro Aid Committee to adopt mass pressure as a central component of its program.²⁸

Disappointment over the Patterson verdict led several mainstream black political figures to express some qualified support for the ILD’s tactics, though these sympathies were shortlived. The already tenuous alliance was broken abruptly when, two weeks after the Easter meeting, violence erupted during the Communists’ May Day demonstration. Liberals and sympathetic black elites turned against the ILD, and those who remained sympathetic to the Left faced a groundswell of opposition from conservatives. Rabbi Benjamin Goldstein, the radical religious leader who had participated in Montgomery’s Marxist study circles, was forced to leave the state because of his support for the ILD. Hostility toward Goldstein was complicated by anti-Semitism, partly sparked by the ILD’s choice of

Samuel Leibowitz as principal counsel in the Scottsboro case. Faced with boycotts and Klan threats, Jewish merchants and other leading members of Montgomery's Temple Beth Or congregation not only asked Goldstein to resign but issued a statement to the press repudiating any outside interference in Southern affairs and pledging their unequivocal support for segregation.²⁹

A series of events in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, a few months later further weakened chances for reconciliation between liberals and Communists. On June 14, 1933, three black men, Dan Pippen, Jr., Elmore (Honey) Clarke, and A. T. Harden, were picked up by police after the body of a twenty-one-year-old white woman was discovered near "Big Sandy." Although there was no concrete evidence linking them to the death, Pippen and Clarke were charged with murder and rape, and Harden was said to have been an accessory to the crime. Tuscaloosa ILD organizer Louis Harper persuaded the three defendants to hire ILD attorneys, but under pressure from the court and police, Harden and Clarke repudiated their retainers. With the support of his mother, Pippen insisted on his right to ILD counsel, but when his lawyers arrived in Tuscaloosa, Judge Henry B. Foster barred them from the court. Once word spread that "communist Jew" lawyers were in Tuscaloosa, attorneys Frank B. Irvin, Irving Schwab, and Allan Taub escaped a sure lynching by leaving town in disguise, under the reluctant protection of the national guard. The three defendants were not so lucky. Two weeks later, so as to avoid another Scottsboro case, Tuscaloosa deputies turned the three men over to a lynch mob. Beaten, burned, and riddled with bullets, Elmore Clarke somehow survived and made his way to the home of a black woman in the area. As soon as a local black physician dressed his wounds, Clarke was turned over to authorities in Montgomery.³⁰

The lynching of Pippen and Harden prompted a flood of angry correspondence from around the country, much of it holding Judge Henry B. Foster responsible. In nearby Birmingham, Communists held a statewide antilynching conference and filed formal charges against Foster, Tuscaloosa sheriff R. L. Shamblin and his staff, and a private detective named W. I. Huff for committing and/or abetting the murders. The criticisms infuriated Judge Foster and mortified Tuscaloosa's leading white citizens, who now began to blame the ILD for the entire incident. The Tuscaloosa Citizens' Protective League retaliated by raiding black homes throughout the county, ostensibly in search of Communists.³¹ Emotions reached a fevered pitch when an eighty-four-year-old invalid, Dennis Cross, was accused of raping a mentally retarded white woman just weeks after the Pippen and Harden lynching. Although Tuscaloosa police dismissed the young woman's claim, the case never came to trial—the elderly black man

was lifted from his bed and lynched.³²

Though known Communists were nowhere in the vicinity when Dennis Cross was murdered, and ILD activist Louis Harper had been run out of town weeks earlier, anti-Communist sentiment fueled a continuing wave of racial violence. The Negro Civic League suffered the brunt of the counterattack and was ultimately driven out of existence, in part because it had established ties with Harper prior to the lynchings. The situation remained tense for quite some time. A year later, J. R. Steelman, a noted liberal Alabama professor who had investigated Tuscaloosa's racial violence for the Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, was approached one night by a mob of Klansmen who accused him of being an "ILD agitator." Although Steelman vigorously denied the charge, hostility toward him and his family forced him to leave the county.³³

The ILD's reputation ruined relations with Alabama liberals, but its inability to build a united front did not impede its work in the courtroom. In June 1933, circuit judge James E. Horton overturned the jury's verdict on the Haywood Patterson trial and ordered a new trial for the defendant. Almost simultaneously, the Alabama Supreme Court dismissed Willie Peterson's appeal, marking a major setback for the NAACP's campaign.³⁴ Charles Houston, dean of Howard University Law School and chief legal counsel for the NAACP, felt the two decisions forewarned of a "social crisis which may determine future leadership of Negroes in the South." Houston grudgingly conceded that the ILD "has [black people's] complete confidence for sincerity and courage, even where they do not endorse its policies." The Peterson case, he felt, was the last hope for the NAACP in the South: "If the NAACP loses out in the Peterson case, the leadership of Negroes in the South passes irretrievably to the ILD." The association's inability to free Peterson led to a sharp schism within the Birmingham branch. When a faction led by president E. W. Taggart tried unsuccessfully to persuade the branch to join forces with the ILD, they were immediately branded "communist sympathizers."³⁵

NAACP secretary Charles McPherson, Taggart's most vocal opponent, convinced the branch executive board to retain John W. Altman, one of Birmingham's most prominent attorneys, to appeal the Peterson case before the U.S. Supreme Court. But this last-ditch effort was to no avail. In January 1934, the Court refused to hear the case, leaving the NAACP no choice but to turn to its last alternative: a gubernatorial gift of clemency for Willie Peterson. Appealing to Governor Benjamin Miller and Alabama's leading citizens, Walter

White and local NAACP officials argued that Peterson's execution must be halted primarily for political reasons, for it “would give Communists the most powerful argument they have ever had for propaganda among Negroes.” Under the advisement of several Alabama law officers who were skeptical of Peterson's guilt, the governor agreed to hold a clemency hearing on March 6, 1934.³⁶ The appeal for clemency in lieu of freedom was unacceptable to ILD activists and equally disappointing to Henrietta Peterson, who now announced her unequivocal support for the ILD. The NAACP drew even more criticism when it agreed to have blacks barred from the clemency hearings. Offended by the announcement, a disgruntled group of ILD members, including Henrietta Peterson, traveled to Montgomery and unsuccessfully tried to force their way into the hearings. Rebuffed by police, they instead staged a demonstration across the street.³⁷

Amid the faint echo of ILD slogans rising from the streets below, Charles McPherson submitted an illuminating petition to the governor that summed up the political meaning of the case. Communism, not Peterson's innocence or guilt, was the issue at hand. The NAACP congratulated itself for “keeping the case within the orderly, respected and dignified channels” and away from organizations “radical in their nature and foreign in their purposes.” The petition merely asked that the NAACP be rewarded for its protracted fight against the ILD and because it “spurned overtures to resort to Mass pressure, to stimulate public opinion, to magnify in the eyes of the world the ‘actual persecution’ of the accused [and for] our profound faith that Justice would prevail and mercy sustains.” The reward was granted; Peterson's death sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. (He died of tuberculosis six years later.)³⁸

Established black leaders heralded the governor's decision, but the hundreds who had joined the ILD-led Peterson defense committees, as well as several rank-and-file NAACP members, scoffed at the association's self-congratulatory tone. “The public is divided,” wrote McPherson, “into two groups, naturally, with reference to what we accomplished by our intelligent handling of the Peterson case. . . . Those who are Communistically inclined are disappointed in that we did not free him.” In retrospect, had the ILD been involved in litigation it might not have fared any better, but Peterson's supporters saw only the refusal of American courts to free a man who was undoubtedly innocent. Choosing to forgo another appeal, the NAACP soon removed the Willie Peterson case from its agenda altogether, and as a consequence lost a large chunk of its membership.³⁹

Meanwhile, the ILD in Birmingham, which had grown to three

thousand by 1934, began to eclipse all other established black organizations. During that same year, the ILD defended Selma city employee Ed Johnson after he was charged with raping a white woman. Johnson's charges were dismissed when the alleged victim admitted in court that police forced her to invent the story, announcing to the jury "that she would not be like Victoria Price, but like Ruby Bates, she would tell the truth." Upon his release, Johnson was almost handed over to a lynch mob, but the ILD foiled the plan by organizing "a defense squad of ex-service men [who] surrounded him and took him to a safe place." A few months later, the ILD intervened on behalf of Walter Brown, a black steel worker from Bessemer who was charged with rape and attempted murder. Like Willie Peterson, Brown did not fit the victim's description, and numerous witnesses testified to his whereabouts at the time of the crime. But he was convicted nonetheless and sentenced to twenty years in prison.⁴⁰

Of all the Communist-led mass organizations in Alabama, the ILD undoubtedly evoked the strongest emotions from both blacks and whites. While most whites viewed the ILD as outside agitators who defended black rapists in an effort to bring about a race war and a sexual revolution in the South, many black working people saw the organization as a sort of public defender for the "race." The ILD's popularity in the black community, however, made them automatic rivals of the black elite in general and the NAACP in particular. In a way, black and white activists in the ILD asserted themselves as defenders of the African-American community's basic constitutional and civil rights and thus entered a realm of political practice usually considered the preserve of black bourgeois or liberal interracial movements. The ILD was not just one additional voice speaking out on behalf of poor blacks; it was a movement composed of poor blacks. It not only provided free legal defense and sought to expose the "class basis" of racism in the South, it gave black working people what traditional middle-class organizations would not—a political voice.

Chapter Five: Negroes Ain' Black—But Red!

Black Communists and the Culture of Opposition

No mo' KU-KLUX-KLAN with
their burnin' crosses.
No mo' chain-gangs, we's no
dogs no' ho'ses.
The NAACP, God no' Moses
Can stop us blackies fightin' the
bosses . . .

Negroes ain' black—but RED!
Teacher Lenin done said
Brothers all oppressed an' po'
Ain't it so? Sho!

—“*No Mo', No Mo'*” (CP song, ca. 1930s)

In 1930, a columnist for the *Daily Worker* predicted that the Communist Party in the South would be composed of young whites “who are not so weighed down by the prejudices of their parents.” But historical reality, as we have seen thus far, had little in common with this writer's vision of rebellious white youth leading the hitherto sleeping black masses in the march to self-determination. Indeed, the prevalence of blacks in the CP earned it the epithet “nigger party” throughout the South. These uninitiated men and women were not intellectuals sympathetic to left-wing movements, nor were they frustrated labor organizers weary of the pace of change. With the possible exception of Montgomery Party leader John Beans, Alabama's black cadre of unskilled and semiskilled industrial workers, sharecroppers, domestics, and housewives had rural roots and no previous experience with radical movements. Accustomed to recruiting working people knowledgeable and sympathetic to left-wing causes, district organizer Tom Johnson noted with surprise that Alabama's black cadre were “not old sympathizers of the party who have been on the fringe of the movement for some time and have absorbed some of our theory and philosophy.”¹

Ironically, what had presumably frustrated Johnson and other

leading Communists ensured the Party's growth and survival in Alabama. Because the movement was built from scratch by people without a Euro-American left-wing tradition, Alabama's black cadre interpreted Communism through the lenses of their own cultural world and the international movement of which they were now a part. Far from being a slumbering mass waiting for Communist direction, black working people entered the movement with a rich culture of opposition that sometimes contradicted, sometimes reinforced the Left's vision of class struggle. The Party offered more than a vehicle for social contestation; it offered a framework for understanding the roots of poverty and racism, linked local struggles to world politics, challenged not only the hegemonic ideology of white supremacy but the petit bourgeois racial politics of the black middle class, and created an atmosphere in which ordinary people could analyze, discuss, and criticize the society in which they lived.

The meshing of an African-American culture of opposition and a Stalinist version of Marxism-Leninism during the radical Third Period will be the subject of this chapter. We will first explore how a Marxist pedagogy in Birmingham and rural Alabama altered black working people's self-definition and preexisting worldview. Then, turning to the traditions of resistance blacks brought to the Party, we will explore how these various modes of opposition affected collective and individual action and dialectically fused with Left culture. Finally, we will discuss the complexities and ambiguities of black radical opposition by examining conflict within the black community between Communists, clergy, and black middle-class spokespersons. By exploring intraracial conflicts we can gain an even deeper understanding of the social, cultural, and ideological nature of this perplexing movement.²

During a brief tour of Birmingham at the Communist Party's invitation, radical playwright John Howard Lawson heard an "older" comrade explain to a young recruit the importance of patience, humility, and study: "There ain't one of us here was born a Communist; we learned it and it ain't easy to learn." The unidentified activist who caught Lawson's attention summed up a critical (and often overlooked) component of Communist political culture. From the outset Communist organizers created educational structures to turn ordinary workers into Marxists. In May 1930, district organizer Tom Johnson held classes for new Party members in Birmingham and Chattanooga, and by October the district committee boasted of its first two-week Party training school in the South. These training schools were never permanent, however, partly because of the Party's underground character and scant resources. More importantly, these imported educational structures were ill-suited to teaching theory to a

largely illiterate and semiliterate membership. Frustrated to the point of abandoning the project, Tom Johnson described the new recruits as “raw green workers with a much lower educational standard than northern workers.”³

Nevertheless, illiterate activists found creative ways to overcome their inability to read and write, which included having Party material read to them. The Party formed study groups that read works in pamphlet form, ranging from James Allen's *Negro Liberation* and Lenin's *What Is to Be Done* to Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*. By mid-1934, the Bessemer section of the Party designated one half-hour of each meeting for study—fifteen minutes of reading aloud and fifteen minutes devoted to discussion. Local leaders made literate members responsible for tutoring their illiterate comrades by establishing partners who met on a regular basis and read Communist tabloids together. Publications such as the *Southern Worker*, the *Daily Worker*, *Working Woman*, the *Labor Defender*, the *Young Worker*, and the *Liberator* were also important sources of information for black Communists. Rank-and-file activists not only tended to have little formal education, but few blacks even owned radios. In 1930 only 3 percent of Birmingham's black community, or 795 families, owned a radio, compared with 40 percent of the white community.⁴

Circulation of Party publications in real numbers was never great, but their readership was much more extensive than subscriptions and individual sales could ever indicate. Because few people could spare money to purchase Communist newspapers regularly, “a single copy would often serve an entire block, to be passed from hand to hand or read aloud to a group.” Moreover, in light of vigilante repression and seditious literature ordinances, possession of radical material could have easily led to arrest or physical intimidation. It was common for Party organizers in the black belt to hide a stack of papers in a hollow tree to be picked up later. As one member of the SCU executive committee explained in 1933, “It is not easy for us to get the *Daily Worker*, but we sneak it in our cabins. One copy goes from one man to his neighbor. We hide it anywhere we think it is safe.”⁵

Unlike the local labor press, or even the mainstream black press, Communist publications carried articles describing the struggles in Africa and the Caribbean. The *Liberator* had special significance for black Alabamians because, much like the Garveyite *Negro World*, it was devoted to racial issues. Hosea Hudson was especially fond of the *Liberator* because it “always was carrying something about the liberation of black people, something about Africa, something about the South. . . . We would read this paper and this would give us great courage.”⁶

The Party's version of Marxist education taught poor blacks to connect their own lives to struggles throughout the world, and the Party's economic theories provided explanations for a number of phenomena, including the roots of poverty, wealth, and racism. But blacks also found within these study groups a source of pride, for after all, many were now receiving what white society had too often denied them—an education. John Garner, a semiliterate coal miner who gave up sharecropping in Bullock County for the Birmingham mines, recalled that one of the main reasons for joining the Party and remaining a Communist for so long was the education it gave him. (His membership lasted over half a century.) Black Communists fortunate enough to study at the “Workers School” in New York, or in some cases at the Lenin School in Moscow, found the experience tantamount to obtaining a diploma of sorts and returned to Alabama proudly exhibiting their newly acquired knowledge. In 1934, Hosea Hudson—who was illiterate at the time—along with two other Communists “rode the rails” to New York in the dead of winter to attend a ten-week course at the Workers School. Hudson returned a changed man: “I felt like I'm somebody. . . . I'm talking about political economy, about the society itself, how it automatically would breed war and fascism. I'm discussing about the danger of imperialist war.” Seeing himself as a learned individual deserving of the respect “better class Negroes” received, Hudson often shared his knowledge with non-Party people, using as his forum the customary social habitat of black males: “I'd be discussing socialism in the barber shop. . . . We'd start the conversation off, then we'd talk about socialism, and how the workers conditions would be improved under socialism. . . . They'd sit down there and wouldn't no one ask no questions, wouldn't interrupt what I'm saying. They wanted to see what I had to tell.”⁷

When Party work required traveling to another state or country, the trip itself was an educational experience. Cornelia Foreman, Archie Mosley, Mack Coad, Henry O. Mayfield, and Al Murphy were among the black Alabamians who traveled to Moscow in the 1930s. Murphy, who was a delegate to the Seventh World Congress in Moscow in 1935, experienced a sense of freedom that was unheard of in the South. During his visit he fell in love with and married a white Soviet woman, but knowing American racism as he did, Murphy could not return to the United States with her. Leaving the woman he loved behind, Murphy opted not to return South, choosing instead to continue Party work in Brooklyn, New York, until he was assigned to Missouri in 1937. Capitola Tasker and her husband Charles, poor sharecroppers from Montgomery County, both traveled a great deal on behalf of the SCU and the Communist Party. Charles Tasker was a delegate to the Chicago Farm Conference held in November 1933, and

in the following year, Capitola Tasker was sent to Paris, France, to address the Women's International Congress against War and Fascism on the SCU's behalf. This international gathering of women made a tremendous impact on Capitola Tasker. "It was heaven on earth," she told the delegates, "to see all those women who speak different languages all voting in harmony for the same thing!"⁸

The alternative education not only gave the young, rebellious constituency of the YCL a sense of pride, it also further underscored the contradictions between what they were being told in the classroom and what they experienced daily. As one YCL organizer in Birmingham explained to the *Young Worker*, "In school they teach us a lot of bunk about what a wonderful country this is, and that everyone gets an equal chance." In the rural areas YCL study groups were very popular because they served as surrogate schools for those unable to attend public schools. The role that these youth-led, makeshift classes played cannot be overestimated in a region where black children attended school on an average of three months of the year and annual educational expenditures for black schools averaged \$3.99 per child compared with \$38.11 per white child.⁹ Under the leadership of Eula Gray, by 1934 seven units of the YCL were formed in Alabama's black belt and Tallapoosa County, and about one hundred Camp Hill students had planned to affiliate with the Communist-led NSL. Gray estimated that young men and women constituted at least one-third of the SCU's total membership. Nevertheless, Party literature was hard to come by and nearly impossible to purchase in a region where most rural families could not even afford basic necessities. YCL members occasionally made requests for material through letters to the Communist press or simply begged for any redundant pamphlets comrades passing through might have in their possession.¹⁰

Pedagogy directed toward black youth did not stop at study groups; sometimes it was sustained by rural families. Although several scholars have argued that Southern black mothers raised their children to be submissive in order to ensure their survival in a violent, racist world, many young activists who were mothers themselves rejected this tradition and, in fact, raised their children to be young Communists.¹¹ Throughout the black belt and Tallapoosa County, the children of Communists and some SCU activists belonged to the Young Pioneers, a national Communist children's auxiliary whose slogan was "Smash the Boy Scouts." When they could obtain copies, these children read the *Young Pioneer* (the organization's regular organ) and were undoubtedly drawn to Michael Quirt's black history cartoons depicting the lives of Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey, and Toussaint L'Ouverture. "Matt Owen," Quirt's popular cartoon strip that had appeared regularly in the *Young Worker*, must have made a

tremendous impression on Pioneers as well as YCL activists; part of the serialized epic depicted a black youth educating two naive white boys about the class struggle while they were all incarcerated in a local jail.¹²

Although it is impossible to measure the Party's impact on these children, during the mid-1930s local authorities in counties with a substantial SCU following feared the growing "impudence" of black youth, and local Agricultural Extension officers went so far as to adopt measures to "deradicalize" children whose parents were suspected union members. At the height of the 1935 cotton pickers' strike, Lee County extension agents built up their 4-H clubs among blacks and distributed a song book entitled "Games and Songs for Old and Young" that included an illuminating parody of "Row, Row, Row Your Boat":

FIGHT LYNCH TERROR!



"Fight Lynch Terror!" (Young Worker, 1930)

Hoe, Hoe, Hoe your row
Steadily every day
Merrily, merrily, cheerily, cheerily,
Half our work is play. . . .

SMASH THE BARRIERS!

Sing, sing, sing your songs
Happily each day
Clearly, clearly, sweetly, sweetly,
Sing your songs today.¹³

"Smash the Barriers!" (Young Worker, 1930)



Communist education, whether through reading or oral transmission, introduced poor rural and urban blacks to international politics and, in turn, placed their own local, seemingly insignificant struggles within a world context. The history of the October Revolution, for example, was among John Garner's first lessons in the history of his movement: "Stalin and Lenin and Molotov, and all those party leaders, they taught folks how to pitch the capitalists off their back and they armed 'em to go to World War I, then they turned the guns on the bosses, that brought about the revolution." When German Communist leader Ernst Thaelmann was incarcerated under Hitler, Communists and SCU members in Tallapoosa County made it their own struggle, distributing hundreds of leaflets throughout the rural eastern piedmont attacking Nazism and pledging support for the German Communist Party. Eula Gray also organized a mass rally outside of Dadeville to protest Thaelmann's imprisonment. By 1934,

when antiwar slogans became ever more prominent in the Party's national program, rank-and-file Communists throughout the state held mass antiwar meetings and produced antiwar literature describing events in Europe. The August 1 antiwar picnic held in Dadeville, attended by over 250 people, provides a remarkable example of rural black Communists' ability to combine local and international traditions. Following a friendly baseball game and a "mouth harp" contest, the group joined together in altered versions of "We Shall Not Be Moved" and "Solidarity" whose lyrics described the militancy and determination of the SCU. As they devoured plates of fried chicken, collard greens, and other culinary contributions, these women, children, and men listened to, among other things, a young Lee County woman speak on "Why I Like the YCL," a report on the Young Pioneers, and a speech on the "woman question" by a leading female SCU leader. They then closed the gathering with renditions of "Arise You Workers" and "The Internationale."¹⁴

The emergence of a counter-hegemonic ideology within Party circles owes much to Marxist pedagogy, but black Communists were not blank sheets when they entered the movement. Instead, they were born and reared in communities with a rich culture of opposition—a culture that enveloped and transformed the Party into a movement more reflective of African-American radical traditions than anything else. Thus, black Communists retained significant cultural influences that resonated through the Leninist wrappings, determining the everyday character of grass-roots activity and, indeed, providing historical legitimacy for the Party's very existence in Alabama.

Even before many black working people jumped headlong into Party work, their evaluation of the movement from afar was often rooted in what George Lipsitz calls a "collective memory."¹⁵ We have seen so far how common folk and literary traditions of the Civil War and Reconstruction effectively deterred poor white participation in the Communist Party. Wedded to dominant racial and sexual mores, white Alabamians responded emotionally—often violently—to Communist activity and even read into basic struggles for social justice a threat to the edifice of Southern civilization. Southern blacks maintained their own informal, oral networks through which the community transmitted its vision of the past and present—a vision hidden or masked from the white world and oppositional to the core. The anti-Communist propaganda that proved particularly effective among white Alabamians actually augmented the Communists' appeal in the black communities. Hidden away in Southern black communities was a folk belief that the Yankees would return to wage another civil war in the South and complete the Reconstruction. When the Communists arrived on the scene, veteran Party activist Hosea Hudson recalls, "the

Negro began to look. Something's gonna happen now. Man, them folks in the North, them folks in New York, in Russia. We thought we was looking to have a war in the South. And when the organizers of the Party came in there representing what these organizations what the Negro been reading about in the paper . . . this is what brought the Negroes into the organization. . . . They thought the North was coming back and they was going to have another war.”¹⁶ Angelo Herndon's attraction to Communists also contained echoes of the past. “Conditions were so bad,” he later wrote, “that many people believed that the only way they could ever get better was to start a new war. . . . I very naively was under the impression that the Unemployed Council was calling all Negro and white workers to a new war.” The idea that the Party's appearance marked the first skirmishes in a new civil war was reiterated in a novel by Myra Page, a Party member who spent considerable time with Alabama militants. As one of her characters put it, in the black belt “a long, bitter scrap's brewin’. Us Communists, white n’ colored, gotta organize n’ lead it. . . . The first Civil War didn't free them, but this one will.”¹⁷

What distinguished this “new war” from the Civil War and Reconstruction was its international dimension. For many black radicals the Russians were the “new Yankees,” Stalin was the “new Lincoln,” and the Soviet Union was a “new Ethiopia” stretching forth her arms in defense of black folk. Southern propaganda depicting Communists as “Soviet agents” worked to the Party's advantage in black working-class communities. The idea of Soviet and/or Northern radical support provided a degree of psychological confidence for African-Americans hoping to wage the long-awaited revolution in the South. With the collapse of biracial unionism and the failure of black middle-class organizations to create a viable alternative, most poor blacks had little confidence in their ability to initiate and sustain a movement without outside assistance. Outnumbered and outgunned, thousands chose migration over militant organization, which many saw as potentially suicidal. A black woman from Orrville, Alabama, provides a telling example; in a letter to the *Daily Worker* she wrote, “We need some help in pushing this movement here. We will keep all your orders secret. Tell us what we must do. Let me hear from you folks up there.”¹⁸

Faced with the centrality of Russia in popular notions of Communism, black radicals (unconsciously) constructed a folklore that mythologized the Soviet Union. John Garner was convinced that Soviet agents organized the Party in Alabama. “The Soviet Union had agents,” he remembered, “that was educating people about the Communist Party. . . . Them agents was all through here.” Likewise, Lemon Johnson, local leader of the Share Croppers’ Union in Hope

Hull, Alabama, felt that Russian support was essential to the union's success, partly because he believed that all the leaflets, handbills, and newspapers he distributed were printed in Russia. Johnson was not alone in his assessment. When a black sharecropper heard about the *Daily Worker* and the activities of the Communists, he searched in vain for a copy of the newspaper. Unsuccessful, "he hit upon the idea of writing to the Soviet Union for the address of the 'Daily.'"¹⁹

The assurance of outside support, even if imagined, and the physical presence of collective organization, engendered a sense of power that lent itself to isolated acts of counteraggression or self-defense. The Communists' presence in Alabama served precisely this function, emboldening individual members who might otherwise have retreated from confrontation. Late in 1934, for example, eight robed Klansmen broke into the home of North Birmingham Communist Steve Simmons and administered a near-fatal beating. When his assailants later discovered—ironically by reading the *Daily Worker*—that he had survived the beating, they paid him another visit. But this time he had barred the doors and windows, and he used his shotgun to disperse the crowd, injuring one member of the mob. A third raid led by two off-duty Birmingham police officers also met Simmons's buckshot. An embarrassed police department complied with the ILD's demand to remove the two officers and finally provided limited protection for the Simmons household. Similarly, when black Communist Saul Davis was kidnapped from his Bessemer home, stripped bare, and whipped for several hours, he defiantly returned to Bessemer to work on behalf of the ILD, even before his wounds had completely healed. Such actions should not be interpreted simply as individual acts of heroism or recklessness. Instead, they represented a broader change in attitude, a growing comfort in the strength of collective action and outside support. Although vigilantes slowed Communist efforts, successful resistance to their attacks neutralized their efficacy because, like lynching, vigilante violence depends ultimately on the overall impression it makes on the community.²⁰

For the most part, however, black radicals resorted to violent confrontation only when there were no other avenues available. Indeed, Communists went to great lengths to avoid violence and open conflict. Like their enslaved ancestors of the antebellum South, black Alabama Communists understood the terrain of struggle and relied primarily on evasive, cunning forms of resistance.²¹ These evasive tactics stood in stark contrast to Communist theoreticians' image of class struggle and the Left literati's constructions of working-class heroism. Poems and short stories in Left periodicals painted a portrait of radical puritans whose unfolding consciousness leapt dramatically from complete docility to revolutionary martyrdom.²²

But proletarian realism hardly depicted African-American realities in the Deep South. Organizers had to rely on their cunning and wit simply to survive, and that often meant wearing a mask of deception. When black Communist Harry Haywood arrived in Birmingham, he was told to “cut out that fast walking with your head up in the air—or these crackers'll spot you. Get that slouch in your walk. Look scared, as if you are about to run.” Although these instructions were offered partly in jest, Haywood recognized “a grain of truth in these remarks.” Sometimes Communists used deception to avoid arrest and its potentially violent sequel. Following the Birmingham May Day battle of 1933, for example, one of the arrestees, ILD organizer and Communist Otis DeBardeleben, practiced the “art of dissimulation” to prevent an almost guaranteed jail sentence. Switching his demeanor from militant to “Sambo,” DeBardeleben convinced the judge that he had been “misled into attending the meeting” because when he read the leaflet inviting all workers, he assumed “it was something like this forestry thing,” and therefore he “went there thinking he could get a job.” While Communists Jane Speed and Ned Goodwin spent time in jail, DeBardeleben was only required to pay a twenty-five-dollar fine and was free to continue his work for the ILD.²³

Much like the trickster characters in African-American folklore, many black Alabama Communists expressed great pride in their ability to outsmart the bosses, as revealed by the ingenious ways activists distributed leaflets in direct violation of seditious literature ordinances and constant police surveillance. In Birmingham, black women posing as laundresses picked up bundles of leaflets, stencils, and paper from the homes of white Communists and smuggled the materials out in baskets of laundry. The leaflets were then distributed throughout the city but were concentrated mainly in Birmingham's various black communities. John Garner recalls with pride and amusement his ability to distribute Party material without police molestation: “I'd pass by, stick ‘em in your door (LAUGHS). Or you'd throw it at your gate. You go into the store to trade, while trading, I'd have a bundle, I'd leave a bundle on the counter there. . . . They didn't never catch me putting out nothing. I had a way to sneak ‘em out.” ILD activist Dobbie Sanders had his own method of spreading the printed word: “I would stick em in my lunch bucket, untie the strings and let the wind blow the leaflets all over the yard. I'd just keep steppin like nothin ever happened.” When leaflets would not suffice, Birmingham radicals left their mark in other ways. While visiting Birmingham in 1934, Myra Page came across the letters “ILD” carved into what was once the wet, fresh concrete of a new sidewalk.²⁴

In the rural areas, handbills announcing strikes or simply popularizing the SCU were not only distributed to other sharecroppers

but targeted at the landlords as well. "All these big white folks," Lemon Johnson recalled, "we'd throw them at they door, put them in the mail box ... be making our demands." These mimeographed sheets were in lieu of demonstrations, allowing the union to confront the landlords from an apparent position of strength while protecting the anonymity of its members. Landlords and police referred to SCU leaflets as "night mail" because they appeared so frequently and yet could not be traced to anyone. A letter to the *Young Worker* described how a group of sharecroppers fooled an infuriated gathering of landlords and overseers who had "paraded the countryside to find the ones who were distributing the leaflets." To avoid capture, the sharecroppers "hid in the bushes until the parade had passed and then got back on the job of putting out their leaflets." In fact, many rural organizers (in the trickster tradition) saw themselves as more intelligent than the powerful landlords, whom they felt could easily be manipulated as long as the SCU's activities remained sub rosa. Describing conditions in Lowndes County, Communist Saul Davis warned his comrades of the increasing constraints on organizers due to the fact that "the bosses is not so dum now since they ben woke up by the stool pigeons."²⁵

Any observer witnessing the interaction between a landlord and a sharecropper, or an employer/foreman and a worker, particularly if the subordinate individual is black, might easily dismiss the latter as docile. Yet, routine compliance on the part of subordinate groups is a logical mask donned for the purposes of survival and does not necessarily represent the actual thinking of the oppressed. As political scientist James C. Scott has ably suggested, such dialogue represents only a "partial transcript." It is within the realm of thought, Scott argues, and not in open behavior, that oppressed classes would more likely express their opposition, simply because the former is less dangerous.²⁶ Understandably, while Alabama Communists were exhorted by their Northern comrades to engage in outrageous acts of rebellion, few found comfort or consolation in martyrdom. (The Left literati often failed to understand that black Alabamians' very identification with the Party was itself an act of resistance.) Hoping to avoid direct confrontation, the Alabama cadre adeptly used resolutions, petitions, publications, and meetings to express the individual and collective "transcripts" that lay hidden from public view. Anonymous leaflets, resolutions, postcards, and letters to landlords and government officials, like the handbill distributed by the Birmingham ILD advising police and Klansmen to "keep their filthy paws off our brothers!" or the unsigned Communist Party resolution submitted to Governor Bibb Graves warning "to start a Revelushon up on ya Bosses," expressed thoughts that only a fearless few articulated

in the presence of their opponents.²⁷

Communist tabloids that published “workers’ correspondence” offer another, more personalized view of radical consciousness. The Party’s broad range of publications provided black Alabamians with a national forum to voice their collective and individual grievances, to lash out against their oppressors, and to articulate their own vision of an alternative world. Complaints from SCU members, which usually began with “I am writing a protest against my landlord,” described in detail sharecroppers’ daily treatment and closed by naming the landlord in question for the purpose of mobilizing readers from across the country to send postcards and letters of protest. The anonymity of the letters freed rural blacks, more commonly young men, to use an angrier, more profane voice than they would have used openly in their own communities, especially in confrontations with landlords or other white authority figures. In an apocalyptic description of revolutionary change, one Dadeville Communist not only adopted strong language but also expressed a desire to use the same voice to the “bosses” face. “The damn bosses and CWA heads don’t give a cuss about a sharecropper. ... I hope to see the day, when we all get together and fight, so we workers will be strong enough to take the land, have plenty of bread and clothing and all. *Let the damn bosses know what we really mean.*” A Lee County YCL worker simply concluded a letter to the *Young Worker* with “To hell with the bosses.”²⁸

Workers’ correspondence represented only a portion, albeit a large one, of the most lucid letters received. Communist editors probably selected the more dramatic missives that reiterated the Communists’ vision of revolutionary change or paralleled the Party’s perception of working-class life. Thus, most published letters focused on the drudgery of work and poverty, the militancy of the rank-and-file, or provided factual accounts of local events. Yet, when used carefully, workers’ correspondence offers an unparalleled source for understanding the complexity of oppositional consciousness. For example, some of the letters from black sharecroppers reveal a great deal about the nature of “hegemony” in the rural South and underscore the fact that opposition arises as much from within the prevailing ideological order as from outside it.²⁹ Several poor black tenants, for example, admonished their landlords for shunning responsibilities as plantation patriarchs while spending great sums of money on superfluous personal consumption. “You can go to [the landlord],” one young sharecropper wrote, “and asking [*sic*] him for something and he will tell a flat footed lie and say he ain’t got money and then go buy himself a fine car.” But few published letters attacked the landlords because of their failure to fulfill their paternal obligations. Only a revolution, wrote one Tallapoosa organizer, could

“break their rotten system down” and truly improve conditions in Alabama. What he had imagined was a new world in which there was neither poverty nor deference; a world where everyone lived like a boss. “We must fight to weaken their tight grip and then we can eat and wear as the ruling class does. It's bad the way we have to go up and ask, and knowing that it is there we must organize into stronger masses and demand the bosses to give us what we want.”³⁰

Among the more commonly published letters were hyperbolic declarations of devotion to the movement, which Communist editors too often took literally. Communists and SCU organizers submitted rhetorical statements pledging to fight fearlessly until death, placing themselves symbolically in the tradition of martyrdom. “The bosses say they are going to starve us Negroes to death,” wrote a young Dadeville woman, “but if I starve I will surely starve in the Union.” A black man, also from Dadeville, boasted of his three-year membership in the SCU and proclaimed his intention “to remain until death, fighting for the Negro rights. . . . The bosses have set out to starve us to death, but we are set to break their rotten system down by organizing into one solid union.” The writer not only echoed the theme of starvation and death that reappears in most of the letters, but pledged a collective rather than individual commitment. Similarly, a black Tallapoosa woman committed her community to support the SCU and the Party, despite the possible consequences. “Even if we are naked, hungry, and denied by the boss, we are going to stand up and fight for our rights!”³¹

Expressions of oppositional thought also manifested themselves in music. In the abandoned houses and isolated churches of rural Alabama, leaders of the SCU sustained a tradition of singing before and after gatherings, a practice adopted from the rural church services after which they patterned their meetings. In addition to standards such as “The Internationale” and “Solidarity Forever,” rural blacks in and around the Party transformed popular spirituals into political songs with new messages. “We Shall Not Be Moved” and the ever popular “Give Me That Old Time Religion” were stock musical forms used to create new Party songs. In the latter, the verse was changed to “Give Me That Old Communist Spirit,” and Party members closed out each stanza with “It was good enough for Lenin, and it's good enough for me.” In the black belt especially, Ralph Gray frequently replaced Lenin in the final line.³² The same melody was also the basis for “The Scottsboro Song”:

The Scottsboro verdict,
The Scottsboro verdict,

The Scottsboro verdict,
Is not good enuf for me.

Its good for big fat bosses,
For workers double-crossers,
For low down slaves and hosses.
But it ain't good enuf for me. . . .³³

The custom of singing protest songs at Party functions or Communist-led demonstrations was surprisingly uncommon in Birmingham during the Third Period and was not adopted until the Popular Front. This is ironic when one considers Birmingham's rich tradition of labor songs and the extent to which black industrial workers—including Communists—were involved in the regional gospel quartet circuit, not to mention the contributions of Southern radical songwriters Ella May Wiggins, Florence Reece, and “Aunt” Molly Jackson.³⁴ But the underground nature of the Party and the repressive terrain in which it operated—from alleys to armed mining camps—impeded the practice of singing even the mildest of Party songs. Nevertheless, Birmingham radicals did manage on occasion to express their attachment to the movement and their vision of the coming world through music. A black woman ILD activist turned “My Mother's Got a Stone That Was Hewn Out of the Mountain” into “We Got a Stone,” which was eventually designated the official ILD song in the South. The chorus was changed to “Come a-rollin’ through Dixie / Come a-rollin’ through Dixie / A-tearin’ down the Kingdom of the boss,” and the verses referred to the militant example of the ILD and the role of workers in the class struggle.³⁵

The music of Southern working people entered Party culture in ways that have usually gone unnoticed. Most of the early songs published in the *Southern Worker* were personal expressions of exploitation and resistance that provided an outlet comparable to workers’ correspondence. One of the earliest editions of the *Southern Worker* received a piece entitled “Autumn Blues” describing the vicissitudes of Southern rural life:

The ‘baccar ain't a sellin’
The corn is dryin’ up,
There ain't a bit of tellin’
Where the army worms will sup.

The weevil eats the cotton,

The beetle eats the beans,
Do you think it's any wonder,
There's nothing in my jeans?³⁶

The *Southern Worker* published “The Bedspread Blues” by an anonymous woman whose lyrics expressed the burden of her own double day as a wife and a worker and emphasized the centrality of her role in the survival of the family:

Work from early morning
Until ten at night;
All the dishes dirty;
Kitchen in a sight;
Landlord comes a-knocking
Says he wants his rent,
All that I can tell him
Haven't got a cent.
I've got the blues;
I've got the blues,
the tufted bedspread blues.

Got a good old husband
Working on relief,
Gets his ninety cents a week,
And a can of beef;
Haven't time to worry,
Got no time to lose,
Got to make a living
Spite the bedspread
blues. . . .³⁷

Secular songs such as these certainly caught the attention of left-wing musicologists, who generally preferred “Negro workaday” songs over spirituals.³⁸ But in spite of the political penchants of radical cultural theorists, black Alabama radicals drew their songs, and much more, from the spiritual world of the community. Many leading Communists failed to understand that most of their black working-class comrades shared with the non-Communist community a grass-roots understanding of exploitation and oppression based more on scripture than anything else. Forged in yesterday's slave quarters, this prophetic interpretation of Christianity had informed black resistance for nearly three centuries. Yet, as Gayraud Wilmore points out, by the early 1920s the black church was no longer at the center of black

resistance. The period after World War I witnessed a “deradicalization” of the black church as well as a simultaneous secularization of black radicalism.³⁹ Nevertheless, a radical interpretation of Christianity continued to thrive outside of the organized church. Ironically, this radical, prophetic tradition of Christianity was a major factor in drawing blacks into the Communist Party and its mass organizations.

References to God and the Bible appeared rather frequently in letters from Alabama's black radicals. “Your movement is the best that I ever heard of,” wrote a black woman from Orrville, Alabama. “God bless you for opening up the eyes of the Negro race. I pray that your leaders will push the fight. ... I am praying the good Lord will put your program over.” Nearly all black rank-and-file Party members attended church regularly, and in Montgomery black Communists initiated the ironic (and short-lived) practice of opening their meetings with a prayer.⁴⁰ The Bible was as much a guide to class struggle as Marx and Engels's *Communist Manifesto*; rank-and-file black Communists and supporters usually saw nothing contradictory in combining religion and politics. Communist “agents” told Alabamians, John Garner remembers, the same thing that “Jesus Christ himself told us”: that “our burden was gonna be heavy like this.” Angelo Herndon initially interpreted the struggle in biblical terms. While at an unemployed meeting, he was reminded of a phrase popular among black folks: “And the day shall come when the bottom rail shall be on top and the top rail on the bottom. The Ethiopians will stretch forth their arms and find their place under the sun.”⁴¹

The mass meetings and oratory describing the possibilities of a future without masters or slaves may have also paralleled the church experience. “The conversion of the masses to Communism is an emotional conversion,” wrote a black Baltimore minister in 1933. “They are shouting happy over what Communism has done for them, and praising God for what they expect it to do. . . .” Herndon's description of his “conversion” to the Party's philosophy reinforces these observations. At the conclusion of a Birmingham unemployed meeting, he was reminded of the time “when my Uncle Jeremiah preached his first sermon. . . . The emotional motivation in both cases was identical, but what a difference in their nature and in their aim!”⁴²

Unlike their counterparts in the urban North, Southern CP leaders rarely challenged the rank-and-file's religious beliefs. Birmingham Communists occasionally debated God's existence, but Party literature produced locally virtually never attacked religion. On the contrary, organizers in the South sometimes appropriated religious imagery and

language, as in Nat Ross's declaration that the Communists "can and will destroy this hell and build a heaven for the Southern working people right here in Dixie." The *Blast*, a Party shop paper in the steel mills, carried "a biting cartoon of one hated foreman, a speed-up demon caricatured with horns, tail and pitchfork."⁴³ Nevertheless, although religion constituted a rich source of oppositional culture, the higher echelons of Communist leadership during the Third Period made no attempt to fuse Marxism and Christianity.

The Communist movement in Alabama resonated with the cultures and traditions of black working people, yet at the same time it offered something fundamentally different. It proposed a new direction, a new kind of politics that required the self-activity of people usually dismissed as inarticulate. For this reason, as we have already glimpsed in Chapter 4, Communists bumped heads with the African-American community's self-appointed spokespersons—the "better class Negroes."

Alabama's black elite epitomized the ethos and work ethic of Booker T. Washington and his National Negro Business League. Thrift, hard work, accommodation, racial solidarity, patience, and the development of black business were the essential building blocks for uplifting the Negro, not open agitation for political rights or social equality. Birmingham black business magnate Rev. W. R. Pettiford once told a group of fellow businessmen, "The establishment of banks . . . and other businesses among us gives promise of a variety of occupations for our people, thus stimulating them to proper preparation." The Magic City was especially well suited for such a strategy, according to Birmingham *Reporter* editor Oscar Adams, simply because "there are more Negroes to eat, wear clothes, carry on business, work, spend money, get sick, die; in general, create more opportunities for better economic life."⁴⁴ Despite racist zoning laws and other debilitating practices, some black businesses did quite well, particularly before the stock market crash. In 1929, Birmingham's black-owned retail stores grossed over \$600,000 in sales, although eight years later this annual figure had dropped to only \$193,000, accumulated at an operating cost of \$75,000. These individual successes notwithstanding, black establishments were quite small and offered few employment opportunities. In 1937, Birmingham's 132 black businesses, most of which were food related, employed only eighty-nine people.⁴⁵

During the depression, the black elite's economic decline was exacerbated by their political powerlessness, exposed partly by the utter failure of Oscar Adams's Benevolent and Legal Aid Association and the local NAACP's impotence during the initial stages of the Scottsboro and Willie Peterson cases. Whereas in the urban North, the

traditional black petite bourgeoisie faced challenges from radical black nationalists as well as leftists,⁴⁶ the Birmingham “old guard” had only to contend with the Communists and each other. Although the conflict between Communists and Birmingham's traditional black leadership laid bare intraracial class distinctions, the black elite did not recognize Communist Party membership as a reflection of working-class politics and instead characterized it as an emotional response on the part of the ignorant and uninformed. Alabama's black Communists, according to Oscar Adams, were merely “irresponsible suckers who are biting at this propaganda either because of ignorance of the results or wanton desire for criminal adventure.” Birmingham NAACP secretary Charles McPherson simply dismissed the ILL as an illegitimate movement comprised of a “large number of our own non-reading classes” that will never become a real force because “intelligent and informed people can not be swept off their feet by the propoganda [*sic*] of a questionable organization.”⁴⁷ What McPherson, Adams, and other traditional black leaders failed to admit, however, was that the organizational activity of their tiny inner circle excluded the opinions of the “non-reading classes.” They assumed the mantle of spokesmen for black working people because they felt the masses were incapable of speaking for themselves. Their perception of this relationship changed when poor blacks joined a movement that articulated working-class grievances, treated them with dignity, and provided a relatively autonomous vehicle through which to engage in social contestation more or less on their own terms.

The Party's ideological assault on Southern society affected the black elite in other ways as well. Because black professionals and businessmen depended on friendly relations with white elites, maintaining the color line was as much a concern for the black petite bourgeoisie as it was for the entire white community. Indeed, black middle-class anti-Communist rhetoric was sometimes indistinguishable from the utterances of white Southern liberals and mild racists. The Birmingham branch of the NAACP assailed the Communists for their refusal to recognize the color line. “This radical organization,” an NAACP petition declared, “in its’ march of destruction of the Social Order, Knows no COLOR LINE, and wherever it finds it possible, it breeds upon the grievances of a discontent [*sic*] people.” The NAACP's statement may have been largely tactical, but it is interesting to note what its leaders chose to emphasize in their attack on the Communists. The Birmingham-based Southern Afro-American Industrial Brotherhood, an organization devoted to supporting black businesses and keeping blacks out of the labor movement, also criticized the Party for its stand on social equality. Its president, the Reverend P. Colfax Rameau, warned that God drew “the line of

demarcation of the races, and in doing so, He made the Aryan Race the leaders of Christian, industrial, commercial, economic, social and political life.” To protect his benighted people from Communism, Rameau hoped to drive all white radicals from the state of Alabama.⁴⁸

It is difficult to determine precisely how much of black middle-class anti-Communism stemmed from a true patriotic impulse and how much was just political posturing. In depression Alabama all ambitious black businessmen and professionals realized that supporting the Communists could lead to a truncated career. Robert Durr, a preacher from Mississippi who moved to Birmingham in 1931, learned this lesson very early. Having first worked as a reporter for the Birmingham *World*, he was drawn to the ILD by the Scottsboro case and the work of the SCU in Tallapoosa County, and he even developed a reputation as “a very vocal radical.” But when TCI offered Durr capital to launch an antiunion black newspaper, the *Weekly Review*, the “radical” phase of his life came to an abrupt end. Durr wrote in one of his first editorials, “Communism is not the way out for the Negro. . . . The best whites and blacks are striving to and can do more to help the Negro of the South upward and onward in any walk of life than ten billion Stalins.” In an interview granted five years after he wrote these words, the former radical offered an epigrammatic explanation of his politics: “By all means keep in with the man who hires and pays you.”⁴⁹

Yet, however daunting the white power structure might have seemed in the segregated South, the “better class of Negroes” still depended upon black constituents and consumers. And when the Communists and other groups were able to organize successful boycotts of black enterprises, the dictum of keeping “with the man” did not always make good business sense. To take one example, when word got out that the Welch Brothers, a prominent black funeral home in Birmingham, had agreed to bury Clifford James and Milo Bentley, victims of the Reeltown shoot-out in 1932, they were “visited by some of their good white friends and had been advised not to bother with them bodies.” The ILD then turned to a smaller, more modest black-owned funeral home in North Birmingham run by undertaker Hickman Jordan. Since Jordan had no direct links to the white business establishment he could afford to ignore the threats from police and Birmingham's leading white citizens. The result was a boost for Jordan's business and a blow to the Welch Brothers. “After Jordan buried those bodies,” Hosea Hudson remembered, “then the people all see. It allowed a lot of people to know that Welch and them backed off. A whole lot of their members quit their burial policies and joined Jordan's policies. Welch Brothers wanted to try to sue Jordan for taking their members away from them.” Nevertheless, the undertaker's

business acumen—interpreted, of course, as an act of defiance—did have its price: throughout the 1940s Jordan's funeral parlor became a prime target for FBI surveillance and harassment.⁵⁰

Within the African-American community, the petite bourgeoisie's base of support and their moral authority were derived from their reputation as honest, dedicated, hard-working advocates for the race—a collective image of self shaped by the black press that they themselves controlled. Black Communists undermined traditional black leaders by openly challenging their political decisions, questioning their loyalty to the poor, or simply deprecating their character. The Party's critique of the black petite bourgeoisie often resulted in unrestrained intraracial class conflict. In November 1934, for example, ILD activists waged a community campaign against A. W. Wood, the black principal of Ensley Council School, whom they accused of conscripting his eighth graders to act as spies for TCI, allowing police officers to beat uncooperative children, and using the threat of dismissal to force female teachers to have sex with him. The campaign mobilized dozens of black Ensley parents in support of a school boycott, which only came to an end when the board of education and local police intervened and punished boycotters for truancy. Black Communist Pete Turney was arrested for issuing the leaflet describing Wood's activities, charged with libel and violating the Downs literature ordinance, and received a two-year prison sentence. Wood, however, kept his job but lost much of the respect he had once enjoyed from the community.⁵¹

Local clergymen received the brunt of Party criticism directed at black traditional leadership. This may seem ironic given the subtle religious undertones of local Party culture, but the Communists' early assault on black ministers had less to do with theology than with the political shortcomings of clerical leadership. While *Southern Worker* columns accused prominent ministers such as Dr. J. H. Eason of Jackson Street Baptist Church and Bishop Socrates O'Neal of stealing funds from their congregations, Communists, for the most part, limited their criticisms to the direction black religious leaders offered. Early in 1931, the Reverend John W. Goodgame of Sixth Avenue Baptist Church was ridiculed for telling “Negro workers to wait for pie in the sky when you die, when they complain of unemployment, starvation wages and Jim Crowism.” Weeks later, a black YCL member published a diatribe entitled “The Red and the Reverend,” which used a Socratic-style dialogue to contrast the Party's militant program with the patient, presumably conciliatory methods of black clergymen. Commenting on a sermon delivered by the pastor of St. James Church, in which he had extolled Booker T. Washington's philosophy of black labor allying with white capital, a black YCL activist sarcastically

agreed with part of his message. "He is right about the workers having nothing in their pockets because the bosses and all bull-faced fakers like him keep the workers' pockets clean, telling them to put a dollar in church and the Lord will give them two."⁵²

The Party's impugning remarks contained some truth. Birmingham's black men of the cloth were notorious for using the pulpit to dissuade black workers from joining the labor movement, and some received healthy subsidies from corporate interests to do so. TCI and other companies built and maintained segregated churches for their employees and only hired pastors willing to disparage organized labor from the pulpit.⁵³ Thus, the recollections of Birmingham steel worker and ILD activist Dobbie Sanders probably reflect the sentiments of a considerable segment of Alabama's black working class: "Man, them preachers is a mess. Most of em ain't no good. Brainwashing, that's what they all about. They should have been race leaders, but instead they are race hold-backers. . . . These preachers go around here charging people to keep them looking back."⁵⁴

If the Party's critique of the black petite bourgeoisie influenced the thinking of black working people, it is because it reinforced an underlying resentment and class antagonism that had been mitigated by centuries of racism. Deeds, not words, exposed the failure of middle-class leadership, illumined the possibilities of radical politics, and contributed to black workers' confidence in their ability to create and sustain a movement of their own making. Victories were few and far between, but there were victories—in the relief offices, in the mines and factories, in the countryside, in the courts, and in the streets. Even when nothing tangible resulted from these activities, Communists rattled the power structure, confirmed the effectiveness of collective action, and displayed an ability to bypass traditional leadership while engaged in social contestation. Moreover, through their own participation many black working people came to realize that a class-based, interracial politics—in which participants operated on a relatively equal plane and put basic rights for African-Americans at the center of their program—was possible (though still improbable) in the Deep South.

This realization posed a significant threat to the dominant racist (and racist) way of thinking. Whereas in other parts of the country cries of paternalism punctuated interracial discourse within Party circles, in Alabama, Northern white Communists generally treated poor blacks with dignity and respect. Although elements of white paternalism were clearly evident, race relations within the Party were still radically different when one considers the daily indignities blacks experienced in the South. "We were called 'comrades,'" Angelo

Herndon wrote, “without condescension or patronage. Better yet, we were treated like equals and brothers.” The interracialism of the Party “confounded and elated” Al Murphy. His first Communist meeting left him stunned: “This was the first time I had ever sat in a gathering among Black and white persons in a Black man's home.” In Hosea Hudson's view, Northern white Communists gave poor black folks a sense of dignity that even the black middle-class denied them: “In order to get anywhere you had to be part of the ‘better class.’ This low class of people was the ones the police was killing what nobody saying nothing about. Outcasts! When the Party come out, these people were somebody. You took these people and made leaders out of them.”⁵⁵

As local leaders, blacks were encouraged to criticize their white comrades, a practice unheard of in any other Southern organization of its time. The freedom and power black Communists enjoyed within the district committee and at other organizational levels frustrated Southern-born whites unaccustomed to assertive, “smart niggers.” The case of white Birmingham Communist Fred Keith provides us with an instructive example. When three Birmingham Party members were invited to the Soviet Union in 1932 to study at the Lenin School, Keith wanted desperately to go, but Hosea Hudson's criticisms of his work among the white unemployed convinced other members of the district committee to reject his request. After three blacks were chosen over Keith, he turned informant and complained to authorities about the favoritism blacks allegedly received in the Party. Keith certainly exaggerated his case, but beneath his commentary lay a modicum of truth. Occasionally the fear of being accused of “white chauvinism” actually dulled the impact of criticism directed at blacks, and in a few rare moments black Communists deftly milked these fears in order to avoid censure. During the 1934 strike wave, white Communist Clyde Johnson and a black comrade, Joe Howard, were asked to organize several Birmingham metal shops, but once the work began Howard suddenly became scarce. When Johnson raised this problem with the district committee, he was reprimanded for allowing “white chauvinism” to get the best of him while Joe Howard, who had promptly joined in the condemnation, completely escaped criticism.⁵⁶ Rare as they might be, these kinds of episodes illustrate a certain hypersensitivity to racism among white radicals and a willingness on the part of some blacks to manipulate these underlying attitudes for their own benefit or protection. Hence, even intra-Party relationships that appeared to have been intimate were often mediated by a variety of masks.

A closer look at the apparent divisions between black Communists and the black middle-class also reveals complex relationships hidden from public dialogue. Intraracial class conflict was never clear-cut,

and both sides exhibited ambivalence toward each other's ideas. Black Communists sometimes expressed aspirations that were more reflective of a bourgeois ethos and values than socialist ideology. John Garner devoted as much time to learning the tailoring trade as he did to organizing mine workers, for in his words, "I didn't intend to be a worker all my days." In fact, he looked to the Party to win his freedom so that he could fulfill his dream "to build a business of my own and then serve people." Garner's dream, resembling in some ways the early yearnings of Al Murphy, Hosea Hudson, Angelo Herndon, and probably others whose backgrounds are still a mystery, may seem contradictory but is not surprising given the social character of Birmingham's black male cadre. They rose from respected, upwardly mobile, working-class families; the Party merely constituted an alternative stepping stone toward respectability within the confines of their world. Though they were belittled and attacked by the black elite, many held respectable positions in their lodge or church. Both Henry O. Mayfield and Hosea Hudson were well known in their communities for singing in gospel quartets. Hudson attained the position of junior deacon of New Bethel Baptist Church, and his good friend and comrade John Beidel rose to full deacon during the Popular Front. True to their moral values, this core of black male leaders tried to abstain from drink, vehemently opposed "womanizing," and felt free to intervene in their comrades' marital problems in order to keep families together.⁵⁷

On the other side of the spectrum, secret monetary donations were regularly forthcoming from black professionals who never publicly expressed support for the Party but privately declared, "I'm with you." One of the most devoted black middle-class supporters, a Birmingham dentist known amiably as "Doc Collins," not only contributed money on occasion but allowed Al Murphy to use his address to receive correspondence from SCU members. It is quite possible that tacit support for the Party and its auxiliaries reflects a more complex political practice at work among members of the black middle class: like the radicals they publicly condemned, they too could have been playing the role of trickster. A confidential survey of attitudes toward Communism conducted in 1932 reveals a greater ambivalence on the part of the Southern black elite than is evident in contemporary politics and journalism. When asked if "Communism is a menace to American ideals and institutions," less than half of the Southern black businessmen and professionals surveyed said yes. And when confronted with the statement, "Democracy in this country is a capitalistic dictatorship," 75 percent of the Southern respondents felt the assertion was quite accurate. The surveyor concluded from the data that Southern black professionals and businessmen were more

radical than their Northern counterparts.⁵⁸ Nonetheless, if the survey represented the Birmingham black elite accurately, then their actions certainly did not reflect their attitudes.

Black religious leaders were perhaps the most divided with respect to the Communists, partly because they came from different class backgrounds and because their vocation brought them face to face with poor people. Although ministers developed a reputation for engaging in antiunion activity, a few modest preachers who had no pastoral obligations devoted time and energy to the labor movement, and some even became staunch Communist supporters.⁵⁹ Aside from these jackleg preachers, a few black pastors actively supported the Party, notably the Reverend George W. Reed of Forty-Fifth Street Baptist Church. An unusual voice among conservative black clergymen, Reed directed most of his efforts to helping the poor and building the labor movement. He remained an unswerving critic of the traditional black elite, compared other preachers to common thieves, and was known to use “a Bible text each evening to defend the trade union movement.” But there were few George W. Reeds, and most black church leaders proved formidable opponents of the Party. Indeed, even mild-mannered reform politics repelled the more prominent clergymen. Fearing reprisals from hostile whites or Southern philanthropists, segments of the ministerial community avoided association with organizations as tame as the NAACP during the early 1930s.⁶⁰

While disparaging remarks and aspersions were exchanged between the pulpit and the Party press, most black Communists ignored commentary on both sides and continued to attend services regularly. But once the Scottsboro campaign gained prominence, local Communists began to see the church as a potential forum for reaching a broader audience and a source of financial support. The Birmingham cadre looked to the black church in defiance of Central Committee directives not to have any dealings with “‘friendly’ Negro preachers.” The Party’s new vocal presence in church affairs, complicated by the volatile atmosphere surrounding the case, divided congregations and led to heightened conflict between Communists and clergy. When Hosea Hudson invited black Birmingham Communist David James to speak at New Bethel Baptist Church in East Birmingham, James met strong opposition from the pastor, the deacons, and most of the congregation. James, who was not a member of the church, gained few adherents with his militant tone and constant references to the Communist Party, which many felt was inappropriate in the house of the Lord.⁶¹

By far the most dramatic confrontation occurred at Bethel Baptist

Church, located in the predominantly black suburb of Collegeville. Although several Communists were Bethel members during the early 1930s, its pastor, the Reverend M. Sears, was among the leading anti-Communists in the Birmingham area and coauthor of the CIC's damning 1931 report, "Radical Activities in Alabama." Tensions between Communists and Sears erupted in the spring of 1933, with the arrest and beating of a Greenwood Red Cross relief worker, Randolph "Doc" Carter. Following a heated argument, the project foreman—a white man—drew a pistol and shot at Carter, who managed to escape unharmed while fellow workers subdued their boss. Sears, who knew Carter, lured him out of hiding and turned him over to the police, who beat him badly while in jail. The arrest and beating of Carter incensed the black communities of Collegeville and Greenwood. Local CP leaders held Sears responsible, distributing a leaflet characterizing him as a "preacher for the lord, spy for the police, and framer-up of workers." A Communist-led committee marched to the Bethel Church to confront the reverend, but as soon as they entered the church, Sears whipped out a shotgun he had hidden behind the pulpit, nearly causing a riot as people madly rushed out of the church. In the aftermath, several people were arrested and Sears was fined for drawing a gun on unarmed citizens.⁶²

The incident at Bethel Baptist Church was in some ways emblematic of intraracial class conflict in Birmingham during the early 1930s. Although class antagonism within the black community predated the Party's presence, in the past it had remained largely ambiguous, a grudging resentment combined with respect and admiration. Examples of praise for the black middle class abound in newspapers, magazines, books, and speeches given in public forums, but critical opinions held by black working people have usually been limited to a hidden transcript found mainly in slums, bars, shacks, barber shops, jokes, songs, toasts, and other spaces or forms of black working-class expression. The appearance of the Communist Party and its auxiliaries brought part of that hidden transcript out in the open. Yet, because racism prevailed, the kind of counter-hegemonic ideology Party purists had hoped for never took hold among black Communists, whose actions were informed by a culture of opposition with deep roots in history and community. They became Communists out of their concern for black people and thus had much in common with the black elite whose leadership they challenged. The Communist Party was such a unique vehicle for black working-class opposition because it encouraged interracial unity without completely compromising racial politics. Irrespective of Comintern directives or official pronouncements, the Alabama CP was resilient enough to conform to black cultural traditions but taut enough to remain Marxist at the

core.

Part II: Up from Bolshevism, 1935–1939

For America we want the best that life in the 20th century can offer—because we love America. And it is because we are “good Americans” in the best sense that we also love our brother toilers throughout the world, regardless of race, color or nationality.

—*Birmingham CP leaflet*, 1935

Our Party has been close to the Negro people of the South. . . . We must now begin to advance a program which will bring us just as close to the masses of Southern whites. We will lead the Negro people to realize their demands, we will begin to win thorough-going liberation for the Negro people only when we begin in practice to rally the Southern whites in unison with the Negro people.

—Francis Franklin, “For a Free, Happy and Prosperous South,” 1938

Chapter Six: The Road to Legality

The Popular Front in Birmingham, 1935–1937

We were in a country in which the Popular Front, at least in my opinion . . . was the way to socialism. And we had to be as open as possible, and not secrete underground. . . . The underground did not appeal to me as romantic or adventurous. It just sucked.

—Robert F. Hall

As 1934 drew to a close, the Communist Party in Alabama had undeniably reached the height of its powers. The Communist-led rank-and-file committees in the mines and factories were infused with new recruits, the ILD was on the verge of overshadowing established black middle-class organizations, and the SCU had ballooned to six thousand members. These new recruits, however, were unaware that events across the Atlantic Ocean—namely, the rise of Hitler in Germany and the threat of a fascist Europe—would significantly alter the Party's direction. As early as June 1934, in response to the growing threat of fascism, Comintern officials instructed Communists across the globe to join forces with their longtime nemeses, the Socialists. The Seventh World Congress of the Comintern in 1935 went even further, abandoning Third Period Communism and promoting broad-based coalition politics that could incorporate liberals and leftists of nearly every stripe. International Communism had entered a new era—the era of the Popular Front.¹

Changes in the Party “line” prompted Central Committee leaders to make adjustments in district leadership and local organizers to adopt a new approach to their work, but the construction of the Popular Front in Birmingham, as elsewhere, was mediated and determined by local conditions. In some ways, Southern Communists faced a situation much like that of the German Communist Party under Hitler. Obviously the repression was not as great, but radicals and labor organizers, particularly in Birmingham, experienced a heightened degree of systematic suppression between 1934 and early 1935. Furthermore, Party leaders were optimistic that the ILD's popularity in Birmingham would open doors to mainstream black political organizations. Although mutual animosities still existed between

Communists and the black elite, by 1935 it appeared that a few barriers were finally tumbling down. With the 1934 strike wave and the rapid growth of the ILD fresh in their minds, Birmingham Communists saw the chance to build a united front around two broad issues: antilabor repression and civil liberties.

When Birmingham Communists first proposed a united front with the Socialist party, district leaders Nat Ross and Ted Wellman focused on the problem of antilabor violence and the suspension of civil liberties, rather than echo Central Committee directives predicating unity on the basis of world politics. In October 1934, the *Southern Worker* carried an open letter to the Socialist party calling for united action against police repression, the Klan, the White Legion, “and other fascist gangs.” A month later, Nat Ross proposed an All-Southern Conference for Trade Union and Civil Rights that would discuss strategies to mitigate “police and KKK terror” in Birmingham.²

On December 6, Communists and Socialists from five Southern states, including Highlander Folk School affiliates James Dombrowski, Zilla Hawes, Howard Kester, and Myles Horton, drew up a sweeping united front agreement around six basic issues. The platform centered on the struggle against fascism, broadly defined to include lynching, antilabor terror, and white supremacist organizations; opposition to most New Deal policies; and unwavering support for Southern unionization on the basis of full equality for blacks and women. Once the document had been drafted, radical Southern Socialists met at Highlander Folk School in Tennessee to endorse it and develop a regional campaign to mobilize support for a united front. The campaign reaped few benefits, however, for virtually every SP leader in the South rejected any association with Communists.³

It should not be surprising that the Highlander group failed to garner support from most Southern Socialists, for they represented a particularly radical faction within the SP. Signatories Dombrowski, Hawes, and Kester identified with the Socialist party's Revolutionary Policy Committee, representing the extreme left wing of the SP. In 1934, all three signed *An Appeal to the Membership of the Socialist Party*, which expressed sympathy for the Soviet Union and called on the Socialist party to become a “militant working class party.” Furthermore, under Myles Horton's direction, the Highlander Folk School was a nonsectarian institution that trained labor organizers of all political persuasions, including Communists. Just prior to the agreement, Horton stated unequivocally that “the best radical work in the South was the exceptional work being done by the CP in the Birmingham area.”⁴

In preparation for the All-Southern Conference for Trade Union and

Civil Rights, the Communists joined the Highlander-based Socialists, trade unionists, and a few local black leaders in a few preliminary united front campaigns. The Party nominated several non-Communist trade union organizers from Birmingham to attend its National Congress for Unemployment and Social Insurance in January 1935. To publicize the coming congress, Party leaders invited a wide array of speakers, including Howard Kester; Rev. Stewart Meachem, Jr., a young, white Birmingham minister; and E. A. Bradford, editor of the *Birmingham World*, to address a mass meeting on the Jefferson County courthouse steps.⁵

The 1935 May Day demonstration became a united front affair in its own right, as Communists formed United May Day committees with trade union leaders and Socialists throughout the Birmingham-Bessemer area. After Commissioner Downs turned down the Party's request for a parade permit, the Communists organized small meetings in Tarrant City, Ensley, Pratt City, Fairfield, Bessemer, and Montgomery rather than promote the defiant spirit of past May Day demonstrations. In Tarrant City, Communist C. Dave Smith shared the podium with Socialist Arlie Barber and the city's mayor, Roy Ingram. Even the Party's May Day leaflets signaled changes in political rhetoric: it assailed the Downs literature ordinance as a denial of "all the rights won by the American people through 150 years of struggle."⁶

Each meeting attracted as many as two to three hundred participants and was generally brief, well ordered, and free of violent incidents. But over the next few days dozens of homes were raided by police in both Birmingham and Bessemer, and Communists throughout the area were picked up for interrogation. Vigilante groups also stepped up their activities. On May Day, newly appointed ILD district secretary Charles Sherrill (who used the pseudonym "Robert Wood") was kidnapped by four men whom he recognized as White Legion members, taken to the outskirts of the city, beaten severely, and threatened with death if he did not leave Birmingham forthwith. Less than two weeks later, white Communist organizer Boris Israel was seized by four vigilantes in an automobile and beaten mercilessly with a blackjack. When they reached the Homewood area, just outside the city limits, Israel was stripped, flogged, and abandoned in an empty field.⁷

The Communist Party's support of the Birmingham laundry workers' strike that spring drew even more fire from police and vigilantes. Involving between twelve and fifteen hundred black female workers, the strike was marred by violence from the very beginning. After several Birmingham laundries and dry cleaners had been

firebombed, police arrested known strike leaders, including Bill Cleante and I. C. Johnson of the Communist-led rank-and-file committee. In a show of solidarity, Communists led a march of some three hundred coal miners through downtown Birmingham in support of the strike, but as they attempted to join the picketing laundry workers, police armed with tear gas and billy clubs forcefully intervened. When truck drivers employed by Birmingham's dry cleaners walked off their jobs in early May, more union leaders were jailed and state troops were called in. The White Legion appealed to young white women to work as strike breakers, arguing that "there are too many Negroes in the industry." Organized labor, for the most part, ignored or ridiculed the strike. Bill Mitch censured the miners for participating in the solidarity march, and the Birmingham Trades Council opposed the laundry union altogether. With few allies aside from the CP and the ILD, union leaders finally conceded defeat on June 12.⁸

After the post-May Day repression had subsided, delegates arrived in Chattanooga on May 26 for the long-awaited All-Southern Conference for Trade Union and Civil Rights. Despite the presence of several leading Southern liberals and clergymen, police intimidation forced the group to transfer the proceedings to the Highlander Folk School in Monteagle, Tennessee. Once the delegates were assembled, it soon became evident that organized labor had all but turned its back on the conference. More importantly, Communist and Socialist organizers suddenly realized that their political clout simply did not extend very far into progressive Southern circles. Overall, the conference fell far short of its originators' expectations.⁹

By the summer of 1935, around the time of the Seventh World Congress, the Party's conception of unity was expanded to include liberals and virtually all willing "progressive forces." In the United States, the liberalization of the Party line translated into a mixture of class-conscious populism, patriotic rhetoric, and a subdued Marxist language. The July 4 edition of the *Daily Worker* carried copious quotes from the Declaration of the Continental Congress meeting in 1774 on the front page, reprinted the entire Declaration of Independence, and published excerpts from the works of Jefferson, Paine, and Adams. Birmingham Party leaders were quick to adopt the new policy, issuing a leaflet on July 4 claiming to be the true political heirs of America's Revolutionary heritage and denouncing the Klan, the White Legion, and all other false prophets as bearers of an "Americanism' of the rich Tories who knifed the Revolution in the back. . . . They are for an 'Americanism' of Wall St. rule, of lynching, company unionism, slave wages and hours, persecution of Negroes and fascist terror against workers and farmers."¹⁰

While “Americanized” Communism had definite implications for the “Negro Question,” the evolution of the Communists’ new policy toward the black middle class grew primarily out of the Party’s experiences in Harlem. After some very successful alliances had been established with radical nationalists and mainstream political figures in opposition to Italy’s invasion of Ethiopia in 1935, the Central Committee elected to drop its slogan of self-determination in the black belt and concentrate on civil rights and discrimination in employment as unifying issues in the black community. The Party also dissolved the already attenuated League of Struggle for Negro Rights and terminated publication of the *Negro Liberator*.¹¹

In Birmingham, however, Ethiopia’s defense against fascist Italy did little to unite Communists and traditional black leaders since few middle-class blacks had been publicly moved by events in East Africa. Instead, local Communists and the ILD called attention to the mounting instances of police brutality and vigilante violence as a focal point for joint action. In December 1934, Birmingham police officer P. E. Dukes fatally shot a black man in an Ensley restaurant, admitting that it had been merely a “prank.” A few months later Louis Rome, another young black man, was shot to death by police in a Southside alley. In August, the near-fatal beating of black YCL activist John Harvey, received at the hands of vigilantes, forced him to flee Alabama permanently. Leaving his family and friends behind, Harvey settled in New York with assistance from the Party. Although the NAACP investigated a few of these incidents of police harassment and vigilante violence, its leaders rejected overtures to join the ILD’s campaign against police brutality.¹²

A landmark Supreme Court decision on the Scottsboro case in 1935 provided the ILD with another opportunity for coalition building within the black community. In the case of *Norris v. Alabama*, the Supreme Court reversed the Alabama verdict, arguing that Norris’s constitutional rights had been violated because the state of Alabama systematically excluded blacks from the jury. Birmingham Communists distributed thousands of mimeographed leaflets calling on blacks to “rise up and demand the right of Negroes to sit on juries and to vote.” Although a group of black women led by ILD activists marched to the Jefferson County courthouse and demanded that their names be placed on the jury rolls, the issue simply did not spark a major campaign. The NAACP and several church leaders quietly applauded the verdict but refused to support the ILD’s efforts to place blacks on the jury rolls.¹³

Neither campaign led to any immediate coalitions, but by mid-1935 there were signs that some black leaders in Alabama were beginning

to warm up to the Communist Party. The Reverend E. H. Hammond, who was himself a victim of police harassment in 1934, joined the ILD because of its campaign against police brutality. John LeFlore, NAACP branch secretary in Mobile, expressed to Walter White his growing respect for the work of local Party activists and even suggested that the association adopt some of their tactics. "Did you notice," he asked White, "how anxious the Communists were to distribute their literature and disseminate information on their cause at our meetings? I was very much impressed with their zeal. It would be wonderful if such spirit could be developed within the NAACP."¹⁴

The formation of the NNC offered a broader, potentially more attractive basis for uniting Communists and the black elite. Partly an outgrowth of the Communist Party's "Hands off Ethiopia" campaign, the NNC was launched in 1935 at the Conference on the Status of the Negro under the New Deal, held at Howard University. The main force behind the congress was John P. Davis, a Harvard Law School graduate who was very close to the CP. Delegates attending the NNC's first national convention in Chicago in 1936 represented 28 states and 585 organizations, and some of its plenary sessions drew as many as 5,000. Although the tone of the conference was clearly left-of-center and essentially anticapitalist, resolutions were passed in support of black business and religious institutions.¹⁵

The NNC had initially planned to direct much of its energy and resources to the South. Congress organizer James W. Ashford traveled to Birmingham just prior to Christmas 1935 to publicize the coming national convention and organize a sponsoring committee that would send an Alabama delegation. Unaware that Ashford had been a YCL leader since 1931 and was currently one of Harlem's most popular Communist organizers, NAACP branch secretary Charles McPherson at first enthusiastically endorsed Ashford's suggestions. Ashford convinced him that the NNC could play a role in "facilitating and strengthening [*sic*] the work of the NAACP and other such organizations," but national NAACP secretary Walter White emphatically instructed the Birmingham branch to have nothing to do with the congress.¹⁶ McPherson dutifully withdrew his support and the Communists ended up shouldering the responsibility for assembling local delegates for the NNC's founding convention. White Communist Clyde Johnson, who led the delegation of SCU members and Birmingham steel workers, was elected to the NNC's presiding committee. Hosea Hart, a black Communist and SCU leader, served on the general resolutions committee and was elected vice-president of the NNC's twelfth district, encompassing Alabama, Georgia, and Florida. Nevertheless, Johnson's and Hart's roles in the NNC were largely symbolic; their work for the SCU took precedence over all

other activities. The only sustained effort to organize an NNC chapter in Alabama did not occur until World War II, when the congress's influence was clearly waning.¹⁷

In spite of the NNC's failure to establish a following in Alabama, changing attitudes among Birmingham NAACP leaders created new opportunities for Communist coalition building. In 1936, the Birmingham branch decided to become more active in both the Scottsboro and Angelo Herndon cases. "Behind the Scottsboro movement and the Angelo Herndon movement," Charles McPherson explained to Walter White, "it can not fail because it strikes at the two main issues of the Negro question." When NAACP branch president Ernest W. Taggart was arrested for carrying an antilynching placard in the streets of Birmingham and charged with violating the Downs ordinance, it even seemed that the NAACP was beginning to adopt the direct action tactics associated with the ILD. The placard called lynching "America's Shame," displayed two vivid photographs of recent lynch victims as well as the following caption: "It Can And May Happen To You Any Day—Climaxes all the evils perpetrated upon the Negro—Over 6,000 Lynched since 1880—Fifteen (15) in 1935. The NAACP has led the fight 27 years against These Evils and for the Negro's right to be FREE And to Live."¹⁸

Rather than deepen Taggart's sympathy for radicals, however, the arrest had the opposite effect. He testified before the court that NAACP activities should not be considered subversive since, on the contrary, they served as a buffer against Communism in Birmingham's black community. Receiving only a suspended sentence and a twenty-eight-dollar fine, Taggart happily reported after the trial that the city commission "led the movement of defending us in the court and had entered into the records a statement to the effect that 'upon careful investigation of the association, its officers, and many of its members they found nothing of a subversive nature as they at first thought.'"¹⁹

Taggart's ambivalence notwithstanding, the higher echelons of CP leadership still seemed a bit reluctant to pursue a formal relationship with Birmingham's black elite. The Central Committee apparently had something else in mind with respect to a Southern Popular Front agenda: a united Southern movement spearheaded by white liberals and organized labor, not the black middle class. Indeed, the Central Committee replaced district organizer Nat Ross with Robert Fowler Hall, a well-educated white Southerner who, in his own words, "could have qualified as a Southern liberal." Described by one of his comrades as "'Alabama' all right, from the slow Mobile drawl that is

his way of talking to the pipe he puffs on constantly,” Rob Hall was born in Pascagoula, Mississippi, in 1906 and was raised in the cosmopolitan port city of Mobile, Alabama. As a teenaged cub reporter for the *Mobile Register* in the early 1920s, Hall stood out even among the city's most liberal whites for his support of African-American suffrage and civil rights. After a year at the University of Alabama, Hall left school in 1925 and spent the next four years working for a Southern railroad company. Hall's work on the railways brought him closer to rural conditions, stimulated his interest in the plight of poor whites, and inspired him to resume his education in agricultural economics. In 1929, he left Alabama to study under Rex Tugwell at Columbia University.²⁰

Hall was drawn to Columbia's left-wing circles almost as soon as he set foot on the Manhattan campus. In addition to editing the *Varsity Review*, he was elected president of the Social Problems Club, which advocated peace and the defense of the Soviet Union, and was a founding member of the Communist-led NSL. In March 1932, under the auspices of the NSL and the International Workers Order, he led a delegation of students to Harlan County, Kentucky, to investigate conditions during the coal miners' strike, but vigilante violence forced the group to retreat back to New York. Shortly after returning from Kentucky, Hall took his politics a step further and joined the Communist Party. The Communists' stand on equal rights for African-Americans, he later explained, was the central reason for his desire to participate in the movement. Because of his extensive knowledge of agricultural economics, Hall was appointed to the Farm Research Bureau, a think tank comprised of the Party's most prominent theorists on farm issues. His work brought him back to Alabama during the summer of 1932, where he met with members of the SCU in Camp Hill. After spending the next two years editing a number of independent farmers' publications, Hall returned to Alabama in 1934 and in little over a year was promoted to district organizer.²¹

Under Hall's direction, white Southerners began to replace veteran white Communists from the North in local leadership positions. In 1935 Bart Logan, a native of Savannah, Georgia, was appointed secretary of the Communist Party in Bessemer. An active trade unionist since 1917, Logan did not have Hall's formal education but was considered a good speaker and a very capable organizer. After joining the Party in Georgia in 1934, Logan moved to Birmingham in March of the following year and quickly rose through the ranks, serving as section organizer in Tarrant City before accepting the highest post in Bessemer. Logan's wife, Belle West, also advanced rapidly within the Birmingham Party. Born in Atlanta, Georgia, she was a sister of the radical preacher Don West, who had been an active

Socialist until he joined the Communist Party in 1934. Educated in private boarding schools in Tennessee and Kentucky, Belle West was only eighteen years old when, in 1935, she moved to Birmingham, became state secretary of the YCL, and led the predominantly black Ladies' Auxiliary of the Hodcarriers Local 810. After marrying Bart Logan in January of 1936, the two adopted the pseudonyms "Jack and Belle Barton."²²

The Party devoted most of the summer of 1935 to building a broad-based campaign to repeal the antisediton laws in Birmingham and Bessemer. With support from the NCDPP, a national collective of radical artists and activists, the Party hoped to challenge the constitutionality of the Downs literature ordinance. On July 29, the NCDPP's five-member delegation openly disseminated copies of the *Daily Worker*, *Nation*, *New Masses*, *New Theater Magazine*, *New Republic*, and the *Labor Defender* while standing in front of Birmingham's city hall. Officers detained and fingerprinted the delegation, but police chief E. L. Hollums refused to charge them in order to avoid litigation and therefore evade the constitutionality test. Instead, Hollums gave the group a garrulous lecture on the dangers of radical propaganda and a stern warning that he would not "be responsible for what may happen" to the delegation if they continued to distribute inflammatory literature in Birmingham. The next day, while en route to Montgomery, their car was fired upon several times by gunmen, forcing them off the road some seventy miles south of Birmingham. When they appealed to Governor Graves for assistance, he dismissed the shooting as a publicity stunt and had the delegation investigated. The group finally decided to leave the state, abandoning the investigation as well as the car.²³

Meanwhile, an even more comprehensive, statewide antisediton bill had been introduced in the Alabama legislature. The bill provided a penalty of one year of hard labor and/or a \$1,000 fine for possessing seditious material or engaging in seditious activity. An amendment exempted "any writing, publication or cartoon appearing in any newspaper or publication permitted to be carried in the U.S. mails." Alabama liberals broke their silence and strongly opposed the bill, unlike their response to the municipal seditious literature ordinances. A few liberal opponents maintained that it was an infringement of First Amendment rights, but most argued that the Communists' presence in Alabama hardly warranted such strong legislation. As one local official put it, "We in Alabama have nothing to fear from the activities of the Communists in our state. Even if they were a hundred times stronger than they are, we can't afford to admit that we are afraid to allow them to expound their political doctrine." Labor leaders objected to the bill as well, although most added the

stipulation that they would support anti-Communist legislation if assured that such laws would not be unjustly used against labor.²⁴



District 17 secretary Robert Fowler Hall, ca. 1940 (courtesy Marge Frantz)

While liberals and labor leaders criticized the bill independently, the ILD mobilized large sections of the black community to protest the legislation. Black support came, not through Popular Front-style coalitions, but through the kind of mass, grass-roots support the Party had long enjoyed. Protesters succeeded in building a “united front from below” through the participation of Communists and ILD activists in local storefront churches, Sunday school groups, and neighborhood self-help organizations such as the “Working Women Club,” the “Adult Club,” and the “Stick Together Club.” Numerous local black clubs and churches flooded Governor Graves’s office with letters, postcards, and resolutions, and dozens of local clergymen audaciously signed the ILD’s mimeographed petition resolving to “continue to organize a strong Communist Party in Alabama, as the political leader of the working class.”²⁵

In the face of mounting opposition, Governor Graves decided to

veto the antisedition bill,²⁶ but the Party's campaign failed to win Southern liberals to the cause of the Popular Front. Because liberal journalists, labor leaders, and clergymen found themselves on the same side of the issue as the Communists, most felt obliged to preface their criticisms with anti-Communist disclaimers. In contrast with black Communist organizers, who generally retained close ties to their own communities and could therefore mobilize support without relying on middle-class blacks, white Communists in 1935 were unable to significantly influence either white workers or liberal Southerners. The Party needed a political liaison, a native Alabamian who did not carry the onus of open Party membership and who could solicit support from the liberal intelligentsia for the Party's agenda. The individual who would fulfill this role was Joseph Gelders.

Described by British writer Cedric Belfrage as “a lanky, soft-voiced, academic-looking man” with an “odd dancing gait,” Gelders was a product of bourgeois upbringing but suffered the kind of social ostracism that came with being a Southern Jew. A native of Birmingham born to a prominent Jewish family, Gelders studied briefly at both the University of Alabama and the Massachusetts Institute of Technology but left school to serve in the U.S. Army during World War I. In 1919, shortly after returning home, Gelders married Esther Frank, a young, bright Montgomery woman who had just returned from Baltimore where she had spent two years at Goucher College. During the next decade, Gelders held several different occupations, from steel worker to automobile salesman. In 1929, both Joe and Esther returned to college; she earned a B.A. and a master's degree in literature, he a master's in physics from the University of Alabama. Completing his degree in 1931, Joe accepted a faculty position at his graduate alma mater and was soon joined by Esther Gelders, who was hired as an instructor in the English department.

Moved by the devastating effects of the depression, the young physics professor immersed himself in the works of Utopian socialists in search of solutions. Gelders applauded the election of Roosevelt, but when federal crop reduction policies were implemented amidst starvation and unemployment, he became disillusioned not just with the New Deal but with capitalism. The Birmingham strike wave, according to Esther Gelders, “startled him out of the lethargy into which university professors are so prone to fall.” And so it was back to the library. During one memorable visit, the professor accidentally stumbled upon Stalin's *Foundations of Leninism* while scanning the shelves for works by Norman Thomas. The more Marxist literature he read, the more convinced he was that the Communist Party possessed the answers he had been searching for.²⁷

But joining the Party was easier said than done. As his daughter Marge Frantz recalls, “He didn't have any idea where to find the Communist Party. In Alabama it was way underground.” As luck would have it, while Gelders was in New Orleans in 1934, having surgery for stomach ulcers, a nurse noticed his Marxist books and put him in contact with local Communist leader W. G. Binkley. With Binkley's encouragement, Gelders traveled to the national headquarters in New York to express his interest in becoming a Communist, but Party leaders dismissed him as a bourgeois intellectual.²⁸

Upon his return home to Tuscaloosa, he visited Birmingham several times in what amounted to a year-long effort to meet district organizer Nat Ross. Eventually Ross sent Ted Wellman to the Gelders' home, probably late in 1934, and initiated Joe Gelders's first contact with the Alabama Party. During the next few months, Joe actively supported the Party's work despite Esther's many reservations about the Left, and he offered his Tuscaloosa home as a rest stop for young white Communists recovering from the wear and tear of organizing. He continued to study Marxism, launched a campus study group affiliated with the NSL, and even found time to attend the All-Southern Conference for Trade Union and Civil Rights in May. Finally, on the heels of the Seventh World Congress, he received clearance to join the Party during the summer of 1935 and promptly returned to New York, accompanied by Esther and his precocious daughter Marge, to study at the Workers' School. He had hoped the trip to New York would win his wife over to the movement. Although failing to persuade Esther, the trip doubtlessly affected his daughter—thirteen-year-old Marge Gelders joined the YCL that summer. Nevertheless, Esther Gelders did what she could to support his interests, providing most of the family income by working as a rental agent in New York while her husband accepted starvation wages as NCDPP secretary. After a year in the New York office, he returned to Alabama in August 1936 as the NCDPP's Southern representative.²⁹

Gelders was the critical link between Communists and liberals, a role requiring him to keep his Party affiliation secret. “As far as he was concerned,” Marge Frantz remembered, “he would have been perfectly happy to have been an open Communist. It was more useful for the Party for him not to be.” He immediately began assembling a staff for the Southern office of the NCDPP, eventually renting “a tiny tenth-floor office . . . just big enough for two desks and chairs and a file” not far from the Birmingham Chamber of Commerce. With assistance from the American Civil Liberties Union, Gelders hired Birmingham attorney Harvey Emerson to defend victims of police and vigilante violence and to fight an assortment of related cases.³⁰

Gelders arrived during a wave of anti-Communist police repression. Between February and August 1936, over a dozen white Communist organizers had been arrested on charges ranging from possession of seditious literature to vagrancy. Police even tried to jail Clyde Johnson and his wife Anne for violating the Mann Act, but possession of a marriage license foiled the plan.³¹ The first case in Alabama requiring the NCDPP's intervention involved the incarceration of Bessemer Party secretary Bart Logan. In July police raided Logan's home on the strength of a liquor warrant and arrested Bart for violating Bessemer's seditious literature ordinance. For possessing copies of the *Nation*, the *New Republic*, the *Birmingham Labor Advocate*, and one copy of the Party's theoretical journal, the *Communist*, Logan was convicted, sentenced to 180 days of hard labor, and fined \$100.³²

Acting under the auspices of the NCDPP, Gelders persuaded several liberal clergymen and trade union leaders in Bessemer to petition to have Logan, who was suffering from tuberculosis, transferred to a sanatorium. Once he was moved to a healthier environment, Gelders planned to use his case to test the constitutionality of the Downs ordinance. But as the campaign to free Bart Logan gained wider publicity, Gelders became the target of a vicious vigilante attack. On the night of September 23, Gelders was kidnapped by four men, taken to the outskirts of the city, and beaten nearly to death. Suffering from multiple lacerations and severe damage to his heart, he awoke the next morning and somehow made his way to nearby Maplesville, Alabama. When the doctor there refused to treat him, he had no alternative but to hitch a ride to Clanton, Alabama, the nearest town with a hospital.³³

Civil liberties activists, labor leaders, and Alabama's liberal community were incensed by the beating of Gelders. The Party and the NCDPP held rallies calling for the immediate apprehension of the assailants, the ACLU offered a \$500 reward for their capture, and the Birmingham labor community responded by forming the Labor Committee against Terrorism in Birmingham. Governor Bibb Graves added his own voice to the chorus of condemnations and offered a \$200 reward for information leading to the capture of Gelders's attackers. Despite public outcry, however, police refused to prosecute the three suspects Gelders had positively identified in a police lineup, and two grand jury hearings did not lead to a single indictment.³⁴ The *Birmingham Post* could not "believe that justice has reached such a low ebb in Jefferson County and law enforcement officers and court officials are so inefficient as to permit the Gelders outrage to go unpunished." Even the ultraconservative news magazine, *Alabama*, expressed disappointment with the verdict. "Gelders is an undesirable

citizen, but the hotheads who beat him up are more dangerous and should have been punished.”³⁵

Although Gelders's assailants were never indicted, his case received a hearing before a U.S. Senate subcommittee investigating civil liberties violations across the country. In addition to his own case, Gelders entered into the record numerous affidavits from Communists and trade union organizers who had experienced vigilante violence and/or police repression because of their labor organizing activities. Testimony and other evidence revealed what the Party had been claiming for the past six years: TCI and other corporations sponsored much of the antilabor violence in the Birmingham area. Following the publicity surrounding Gelders's beating and the Senate subcommittee hearings, incidents of antiradical violence diminished considerably. By the end of January 1937, Gelders reported “an improved situation at Birmingham.”³⁶

Developments in the Bart Logan case also gave the Party and the NCDPP cause to celebrate. In November 1936, Logan was finally released after the Alabama Court of Appeals ruled the Bessemer literature ordinance unconstitutional. The decision's meaning as explained in Party publications reflected a new approach to politics under the Popular Front. The ILD's old slogans that justice was not possible in “capitalist courts,” or that “mass pressure” proved to be the most effective means to obtain a fair ruling, were not raised at all in the fall of 1936. Instead, Logan's release was seen as an indication that “the Party has broken through into partial legality in Birmingham.” The struggle to achieve “partial legality” was not just another slogan; it exemplified a conscious policy to reconstruct a more popular Party. By repudiating all vestiges of the Party's underground past, Communist leaders hoped to enter the mainstream political arena. Indeed, by mid-1936, national Communist leadership had abandoned efforts to build a Farmer-Labor party and showed signs of support for Roosevelt's reelection.³⁷

The 1936 election returns might suggest that the strategy was succeeding in Alabama. Despite the fact that many Alabama Communists and sympathizers able to participate probably cast their vote for Roosevelt, the Party's ticket of Earl Browder and James Ford received 679 votes from the state, only 47 less than the 1932 tally. Yet, the county returns reveal significant demographic shifts in Party support. Jefferson County, which cast only 33 votes for Foster and Ford in 1932, led all other counties with 180 votes, thus reflecting a huge increase among Birmingham's white community. With the exception of Clay County (127 votes) and Elmore County (145 votes), the Party's rural vote declined substantially. In Clay County, where

only 13 people voted Communist in 1932, the organizing efforts of Clyde Johnson and Walker Martin among poor white farmers in 1936 probably account for the sudden increase, although the other counties in which they were active do not show the same results. The Elmore County tallies, while undoubtedly heartening to the Party, reveal a loss of nearly half the Communist vote since 1932.³⁸

More importantly, the Party statewide suffered tremendous losses in dues-paying membership. The combined membership for District 17 (Alabama, Mississippi, and Georgia) dropped from 425 in January 1936 to 250 twelve months later—a substantial loss when we take into account that in 1934 Birmingham alone claimed 1,000 members. The loss is all the more surprising in light of the fact that, from 1936–37, District 17 received the largest subsidy from national headquarters compared with all thirty-five districts, and in 1936 alone the district reportedly accepted subsidies amounting to \$3,854.22, nearly five times the average received by other districts. Taken together, the electoral and membership data indicate that as white support in Birmingham increased, black membership decreased.³⁹

Hoping to compensate for the loss and move deeper into mainstream community life, district leaders organized an open Build the Party Conference in Birmingham in March 1937. Delegates passed resolutions praising Roosevelt's efforts to reform the U.S. Supreme Court, pledging an active role in the newly formed CIO in Alabama, condemning Italy's intrusions in Ethiopia, and supporting Republican forces in the Spanish Civil War. (The war inspired black Communist Mack Coad and four white Alabama Communists, Kenneth Bridenthal, Eddie Burke, George Millstone, and Warren “Red” Brown, to join the Abraham Lincoln Brigade on the Spanish war front.) The most prominent issue on the agenda, however, was the struggle to achieve “legality” in the South.⁴⁰

Inspired by the new spirit of “openness,” district leadership established an office (231 Clark Building) in Birmingham early in 1937—the first office under the Communists’ name since 1930. A few months later, twenty-seven-year-old Jane Speed, a veteran of the early period, established Birmingham's first Marxist bookstore. The “Jane Speed Bookstore,” later renamed the Modern Bookshop, was located at 1907 5th Avenue North, a tiny storefront not far from city hall. In typical Popular Front fashion, its grand opening was held on Constitution Day and its windows were decorated with drawings of Thomas Jefferson, Ben Franklin, Thomas Paine, and printed excerpts from the U.S. and USSR constitutions. Speed sold Communist material, books on the labor movement and black history, and decked the walls with paintings by local black artists. The store hardly paid for itself,

but it did become an important interracial social center for Birmingham radicals.⁴¹

The first *open* All-Southern Communist Party Conference, held in September 1937, was considered a crucial step toward achieving legality below the Mason-Dixon line. One hundred thirty-one delegates from Alabama, Tennessee, Virginia, Kentucky, Florida, Louisiana, and North Carolina piled into the public auditorium in Chattanooga, Tennessee, to hear Earl Browder discuss the “revolutionary traditions of the old South,” James Ford speak on the pivotal role of blacks in the Southern struggle, and an array of Southern Communist and non-Communist organizers describe recent local victories in the struggle for legality. Resolutions and speeches repeatedly claimed that the CIO organizing drive, Roosevelt's election, and the Party's growing influence in the region curbed the political strength of Southern reactionaries and allowed for the flowering of liberalism in the region. The time was ripe for a liberal-labor-Communist alliance, the fruit of the People's Front.⁴²

Winning Southern liberal support posed a problem, however. After a long debate, delegates of the All-Southern Conference agreed that the first step should be to replace the *Southern Worker* with “an adequate Southern Party organ.” Two months later, Southern Communist leaders published the first issue of the *New South*, a magazine “designed to influence liberals and progressives throughout the Southern States.” Discontinuing local news coverage, workers' correspondence, and other remnants of the past, the *New South* carried sophisticated articles on Democratic politics, the poll tax, the work of Southern liberals, and occasional pieces on Southern history. Not surprisingly, by the third issue the masthead was changed from “published by the Communist Party,” to “Journal of Progressive Opinion.”⁴³

The Central Committee also tried to change the face of Communism below the Mason-Dixon line by appointing more Southerners to district and state leadership positions. But the New York-based leadership took their experiment in “Southernization” only so far. Heading the Tennessee party was New York-born Ted Wellman, the infamous “Sid Benson” of the early Birmingham days. More significantly, in 1937 the Central Committee chose as its Southern representative John J. Ballam, a consummate Yankee. One of Boston's earliest Communists, Ballam had edited the *New England Worker*, served a one-year sentence for violating the Espionage Act, and even tried to flee the country after being indicted under the Massachusetts antianarchy act. Ballam's veteran status, probably more than anything else, qualified him for the job as watchdog over the Southern cadre.⁴⁴

That many of the key Party positions were still held by Northerners certainly did not help efforts to narrow the gap between Communists and liberals. On the other hand, the fact that blacks held no regional or state positions, nor served on the *New South* editorial board, did not hurt matters either. In the 1930s most Southern liberals were segregationists who advocated mild reforms that did not challenge the status quo. Thus the Party's overtures toward Southern liberals required, in Rob Hall's words, a "new attitude on the Negro question." "We cannot," he continued, "cry 'white chauvinism' against every Southern progressive white who still carries with him, despite a generally progressive position, considerable remnants of the old race prejudice." In some ways Party leadership had begun to compromise its militant antiracism for the sake of political expediency. In 1938, for instance, the Communists endorsed Lister Hill to fill Hugo Black's seat in the senate despite Hill's opposition to antilynching legislation. Given his opponent's antilabor, anti-New Deal politics, Hill was seen as the lesser of two evils. Hugo Black's appointment to the Supreme Court received glowing praise in the *New South*, even though the announcement drew vocal opposition from black leaders who recalled his earlier Klan connections in the 1920s.⁴⁵

The need to placate white liberals might even explain why Communist leaders began to deemphasize, however slightly, their involvement in local black issue oriented politics. In 1937, the district committee dismantled the ILD in Alabama and encouraged black Communists to become active in the NAACP—a decision that turned out to be an unexpected boon to the association. E. W. Taggart's arrest in 1936 and the NAACP's gradual adoption of direct action tactics undoubtedly helped boost its popularity, but the sudden influx of Communists and former ILD activists nearly quadrupled the Birmingham branch's membership rolls. By 1937, the branch had a paid-up membership of nearly 750 people—the largest figure since the early 1920s. But for most black Communists, linking arms with the black elite was more of a duty than a pleasure. According to Hosea Hudson, local Party leaders had to "hammer and hammer on our people, especially Negroes, to become members of the NAACP as a mass organization. Before, we just knew it was there, but we didn't go, that was the better class of folks was in the NAACP. A ordinary Negro didn't feel that was his place." Although individual Communists held no leadership positions in the NAACP, they served as a liaison between the Birmingham branch and black working-class communities, bringing local cases involving poor blacks to the association's attention.⁴⁶

Nevertheless, the new cadre (with the Central Committee's encouragement) exhibited a greater appreciation for black culture,

including the grass-roots theology that had forcibly made a niche for itself within rank-and-file circles. Party theorists during the Popular Front not only described black spirituals as America's most potent strain of protest music, but they suddenly discovered "that the Negro church had a rich history of revolutionary traditions with such outstanding leaders as Richard Allen [and] Gabriel, who were leaders of the abolitionist movement in the South."⁴⁷ The March-April 1936 edition of the *Southern Worker* began publishing a column entitled "From Churches," its first article covering the activities of an interdenominational "Race Relations Day." Two months later, the *Southern Worker* reprinted radical cartoonist Art Young's mock advertisement depicting Jesus Christ and the word "REWARD!" placed above in bold relief. Described as a poor carpenter who "associates with common working people, the unemployed and bums," Jesus was wanted by authorities, the ad declared, for "Sedition, Criminal Anarchy, Vagrancy, and Conspiring to Overthrow the Established Government," thus drawing an analogy between anti-Communist and anti-Christian persecution. The idea to reprint the Young piece was Rob Hall's, who had long believed that "religion was the way to approach the masses in the South." Though the Central Committee did not completely agree with his assessment, there were definite signs of tolerance toward religion. "Most of the thousands of Baptist preachers are poor men," observed the *Southern Worker* in 1937. "They work or have worked with their hands. We should be fighting like the early Baptists for land to till, for freedom of speech, press and assembly." Communists and supporters were even encouraged to join churches and various other religious organizations.⁴⁸

Late in 1937, the district committee—in accordance with Central Committee directives—implemented a series of reforms to improve recruitment and to restructure the CP along the lines of traditional political parties. It decentralized the whole Southern region, limiting District 17 to Alabama exclusively; larger "branches" or "Party clubs" replaced the shop and neighborhood units; the three-person politburo, which had overseen the district committee during the early period, was abolished, as was the practice of dividing Birmingham into seven separate sections with section leaders. Under the new system, a single "county committee" composed of branch leaders replaced the district committee made up of section leaders. Rob Hall still ran the show, but his title was changed from district organizer to state secretary.⁴⁹

Perhaps the greatest consequence of the branch system was the relaxation of discipline. Membership in a Party branch, unlike the units of the early 1930s, did not require active participation—only that dues be paid regularly. To become a Communist, one simply had to sign a card and pay a minimal registration fee. Indeed, the Alabama

CP launched competitive membership drives much like the NAACP or the YWCA. A stanza from an Alabama Party song based on the tune “Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho” illustrates the growing emphasis on dues and mass recruitment:

Get new members and
pay our dues,
pay our dues,
pay our dues,
Get new members and
pay our dues,
Fighting for our promised land. . . .

Yet, by abandoning the disciplinary and critical structures that required active participation and designated specific tasks to Party activists, the everyday work of organizing still fell on the shoulders of a few. Moreover, a small component of the Party's new membership included FBI and police informers who, under the new policies, could more easily infiltrate the organization.⁵⁰

Branch leaders encouraged entire families, particularly wives and children, to become involved in Party affairs. A few Birmingham Party leaders especially tried to increase female membership, which had declined precipitously in the urban areas. A rather halfhearted recruiting drive in June 1937 attracted only fifteen women in all of District 17—ten housewives, three “working women,” and two women categorized as “teachers/ students.” Of course, the shift from neighborhood relief committees to industrial labor organizing and liberal politics made the Party less attractive to women, black or white. But male Communists, especially Birmingham's traditional, church-based miners and steel workers, posed obstacles to women's participation as well. As one black woman organizer observed, “The men deliberately kept [their wives] from advancing.”⁵¹

The branch meetings themselves were meant to evoke a family-like atmosphere. Like their rural comrades of the early 1930s, Birmingham branch leaders opened and closed with songs such as “We Shall Not Be Moved,” “We Are Climbing Jacob's Ladder,” and “Solidarity Forever.” Party members transformed popular songs and spirituals by adding new lyrics, a practice reminiscent of previous years. Black and white unity, suffrage, and the traditions of Southern working people were among the more common themes that reappeared in Alabama Party songs during the Popular Front. But the lyricists of the late 1930s were generally educated white Marxists whose conscious efforts to “Southernize” the Party of Lenin often resulted in awkward verse. One

anonymous organizer added these lyrics to the tune of “Dixie”:

We'll get rid of Bourbon landlord
And the rule of absent bank board
On the way, every day, making
way for Socialism. . . .⁵²

The first two years of the Popular Front radically changed the face of the Birmingham CP, but the new political line, no matter how foreign or incongruous it might have seemed to veteran radicals, was deftly applied to some very old problems. As a response to police and vigilante repression, the Popular Front was seen by district leadership as an opportunity to mitigate the violence by turning the Party into a respectable, legitimate political movement. More importantly, like their comrades across the country, Birmingham leaders were genuinely excited over the prospect of creating a truly American movement. Infused with a new, Southern-born, Southern-bred cadre, Alabama Communists reached out to Socialists, the black elite, white liberals, religious leaders, and other “progressive forces” in an effort to broaden the Party's base of support.

In spite of these measures, however, the Party's support among rural and urban blacks continued to decline. Hosea Hudson's recollections suggest that “white chauvinism” during the Popular Front might have contributed to the decrease in active black membership. He recalled incidents in which several of his friends left the Party because of treatment meted out by district leadership or for lack of financial support for black organizers.⁵³ But in a region where white rank-and-file Communists occasionally referred to a compatriot as “comrade nigger,” it is unlikely that white chauvinism alone could provoke an exodus of blacks. The Party's changing composition was not simply a case of growing dissatisfaction; it was an outgrowth of the very policies intended to broaden the movement. To fully understand this phenomenon, we must move out from the center to the periphery and explore the Party's role in the labor movement, the growth and collapse of the SCU, and Communist efforts to build alliances with Southern liberals and the black middle class.

Chapter Seven: The CIO's in Dixie!

In the days gone by when they had their way,
We used to hear the bosses say:
Look away, look away, look away, union man.

But the CIO's in Dixie,
Hurray, Hurray!
The CIO is going to grow
Away down South in Dixie;
Oh ho, Oh ho, the CIO's in Dixie.
Oh ho, Oh ho, the CIO's in Dixie.

—“*Look Ahead, Working Man*,” ca. 1938

Skeptical of the Party's new language of unity and pronounced “Americanization,” Alabama labor leaders ignored Communist overtures for a Left-labor alliance. The 1934 strike wave still loomed large in the minds of most labor bureaucrats, and the Party's initial reluctance to alter its old tactics seemed to belie Popular Front rhetoric. As late as spring of 1935, Communist coal miners tried to mobilize rank-and-file support for a national coal strike on April 1, which had been strongly opposed by UMWA president William Mitch. The “April 1st” movement never materialized in Alabama, but two months later the UMWA officially endorsed a national bituminous coal strike. The strike led to a new Appalachian agreement between coal operators and the UMWA in most states affected, but Alabama coal operators refused to adhere to the new settlement and the strike lasted there until November 20. The miners returned to work after Governor Graves persuaded coal operators to give them 50 percent of the requested wage increase.¹

Over the next several months, Communists continued to aggravate Alabama labor leaders by supporting demonstrations and wildcat strikes on WPA projects in Walker and Jefferson counties. The ASFL, whose officers had agreed to discourage relief workers’ strikes on federal projects, felt the Party's actions were disruptive and embarrassing. Through its organ, the *Labor Advocate*, the Birmingham Trades Council published a bitter series of anti-Communist diatribes beginning in January 1936. One such editorial titled “The Red Menace” described Birmingham's Communists as “emissaries of the Moscow cult [who] have all of the wisdom of the serpent but little if

any of the harmlessness of the dove.” In February the advisory committee of the Birmingham Trades Council conducted an investigation into alleged radical activity within the labor movement and alarmingly discovered many “Communists in Alabama with bona fide credentials from the Russian Communist Party.” With an eye toward the upcoming ASFL convention in the spring, the advisory committee appealed to local, state, and national AFL leaders to “help us fight to get rid of the Russian directed Communists.”²

The formation of the CIO in 1935—originally an opposition movement within the AFL led by John L. Lewis—fanned the flames of anti-Communism while simultaneously creating fortuitous opportunities for Communists in the labor movement. Having recently abandoned dual unionism, the Party was hesitant at first to endorse the CIO, especially since its progenitor, John L. Lewis, had long been on the CPUSA's list of archenemies. But for the sake of industrial unionism, Lewis let bygones be bygones and deftly solicited the Communists' most idealistic and fearless organizers to launch CIO campaigns. Recognizing an opportunity to gain broader support and legitimacy from organized labor, the Central Committee proved its loyalty to Lewis by abolishing Communist shop units and shop newspapers. Moreover, they kept their Party affiliation to themselves and chose to subordinate their larger goals to the immediate needs of the labor movement.³

Lewis's alleged ties with Communists caused noticeable tension during the 1936 ASFL convention in Florence, Alabama. Federation president Robert R. Moore delivered a rousing speech calling for the removal of all Communists from the ranks of organized labor. Tensions were exacerbated, however, when Rob Hall persuaded black veteran UMWA organizer Walter Jones to introduce an anti-poll-tax resolution and a resolution demanding freedom for the Scottsboro Boys, both of which Jones heartily supported. When Yelverton Cowherd, secretary of the resolutions committee, discovered who was really responsible for the two resolutions, he delivered a vindictive polemic against the Communists, which elicited shouts of approval from delegates. Even Walter Jones joined the chorus, dismissing the resolutions he himself had introduced as “an effort to break down friendly relations between white and Negro workers.” With emotions running high, the convention swiftly passed a resolution requiring all Alabama locals to purge their ranks of Communists.⁴

Anti-Communism did not automatically translate into anti-CIO sentiment, however. When the AFL's executive board decided to expel the CIO unions in September 1936, just five months after the ASFL convention, Alabama labor leaders were reluctant to follow suit.

Responding to AFL president William Green's harsh denunciations of the CIO, Birmingham labor organizer W. O. Hare felt that a split of this kind would do irreparable damage to the labor movement in Alabama. "You will understand," Hare explained to Green, "that the labor movement in Alabama is way heavy with CIO groups, and just to jump in and start a fight right at this time would almost mean the entire destruction of the labor movement here." William Mitch, who was forced to resign as ASFL president after the expulsion, similarly advised AFL leaders that red-baiting "will antagonize the situation and if such tactics are continued, they will be met with similar tactics." But the warnings were never heeded. A few months after the expulsion, the Birmingham Trades Council announced that John L. Lewis "now works hand-in-glove with the disciples of revolution." The *Labor Advocate* did not mince words when it described "America's Public Enemy No. 1" in a blistering editorial: "The CIO under its Communist leaders is a menace to the country. *No man's job is safe*; no man's investment is safe, and no single American institution, from the courts on down to the schools, is safe so long as the CIO is allowed to operate in defiance of law and order." The Communist issue even forced CIO supporters into a position of attacking Communism in order to prove the union's loyalty. The Birmingham *Southern Labor Review*, a tireless advocate of the CIO, earnestly condemned Communism: "We believe that Communism, like other alien creeds, is antagonistic to America and American ideals."⁵

The strongest condemnations of the CIO came from outside the labor movement, serving as a potent reminder that anti-Communism and anti-labor repression were inextricably linked. In Gadsden, Alabama, an industrial town in Etowah County where the Party's influence had always been negligible, vociferous anti-Communist sentiment nearly destroyed the CIO's early efforts to organize rubber workers employed by the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company. In 1936, a Gadsden rubber workers' local that had originally been chartered as an AFL federal local, opted to join the URWA, a CIO affiliate, and launched a massive campaign to unionize the entire plant. The campaign began free of incident, until a wave of sit-down strikes in rubber plants in Akron, Ohio, fueled suspicions that the URWA was a Communist-dominated union. The Gadsden City Council passed several anti-Communist ordinances prohibiting racially mixed assemblies with the alleged purpose of overthrowing the government or destroying private property, and vigilantes punished a few local URWA members. Violence and community opposition prompted local organizers to invite URWA president Sherman H. Dalrymple to Gadsden to assist with the campaign. At his first public engagement in Gadsden, Dalrymple was dragged from the podium by vigilantes,

beaten, and pelted with rotten eggs. A few days later, several URWA organizers were assaulted and the union's office was ransacked.⁶

After the NLRB outlawed Goodyear's employee representation plan in 1937, the Gadsden plant sponsored the Etowah Rubber Workers Organization to counter the URWA. ERWO president Jimmy Karam sought to discredit the URWA and the CIO with accusations of Communist domination. "Stalin is the head of Russia," Karam declared, "and John L. Lewis is trying to be the same thing here. Communists are working here every day using the CIO as a cover up."⁷ More accurately, Karam himself used the threat of Communism as a cover-up for mobilizing community opposition to the URWA. Indeed, the Party did not become directly involved in the affairs of Gadsden rubber workers until the summer of 1937, when black Communist Andy Brown visited the area to investigate these incidents of antilabor violence. Representing the Hod Carriers and Common Laborers Union of Birmingham, Brown was kidnapped and beaten after he made several inquiries into earlier beatings. Local police found Brown lying in the street and delivered him to a local doctor who insisted on knowing "if I were a CIO organizer—if I had been to Russia, and whether I had read the propaganda of the Communists." When Ebb Cox conducted a follow-up investigation, he too was kidnapped and beaten.⁸

Under the auspices of the NCDPP, Joe Gelders organized a delegation of Alabama ministers and journalists to investigate the situation. Gelders had hoped that a committee of respected citizens could convince the people of Gadsden that the Communist issue was merely a ruse to weaken the CIO's organizing drive in the rubber industry. One of the delegates, the Reverend A. M. Freeman, agreed that anti-CIO propaganda was "a red herring, a subterfuge, to drive public attention from the methods being used by industry to strip the workers of their rights as American citizens." The committee's efforts not only failed to penetrate the wall of anti-Communism, but Gelders himself narrowly escaped being the next victim of antilabor violence after a mob of irate citizens surrounded his hotel room. In the end, the URWA did not sign a contract with the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company in Gadsden until 1943.⁹

Gadsden was a unique case, however, because the vast majority of rubber workers were white and none of its organizers appeared to have been Communists or even sympathetic to the Left. In other CIO unions, where blacks constituted a majority or a large minority of the rank-and-file, charges of Communist domination were more than a red herring for union busting. As we have seen time and time again, anti-Communism was also a veil for racism. Less than two months after the

Florence convention, ASFL counsel John Altman (whose firm, ironically, had been retained by the NAACP two years earlier in behalf of Willie Peterson) stated unequivocally, "Organized Labor in Alabama will not tolerate social equality between the whites and the blacks advocated by the Communists. ... It will be the ruination of Organized Labor." Altman even accused William Mitch of practicing "what the Communists preach on Negro equality in the ranks of the United Mine Workers and Organized Labor." Birmingham NAACP leader W. C. Patton, himself a staunch opponent of Communism, observed that the CIO's Red reputation developed because "the motives and objectives of the CIO did not concur with the philosophy of those who were Klanish."¹⁰

The Alabama CIO had its share of Klanish bureaucrats, but their willingness to organize black workers was motivated by pragmatism, not idealism. The union's success depended on support from the black working class, the base of Birmingham's unskilled industrial labor force. Yet, in order to deflect accusations of Communism, the CIO had to somehow deemphasize the issue of race—a difficult task given the large percentage of black industrial workers, the dominant and increasingly vocal presence of blacks in the union, and the interracial prerequisites of industrial organization. The CIO organizing drive was further complicated by the fact that many of its most willing and able organizers were Communists.

The steel industry was perhaps the CIO's greatest challenge because of the interracial composition of its labor force and the vigilance with which its owners opposed unionization. Launched during the summer of 1936, the Steel Workers Organizing Committee agreed to take over the nearly defunct locals of the Amalgamated Association of Iron, Steel and Tin Workers. William Mitch was appointed Southern regional director of SWOC and Birmingham attorney Noel Beddow was the committee's choice for regional executive secretary. Although Beddow was not an experienced labor organizer, he had served as chief compliance officer for the NRA in Alabama. To the chagrin of SWOC administrators, steel companies frequently exploited racial divisions in an effort to weaken union solidarity. Company propaganda portrayed SWOC as a "nigger union" and, at least for the first few years of its existence, effectively kept most white workers from joining. And in addition to company-sponsored vigilante violence, municipal laws were sometimes invoked to break the union. Since SWOC prohibited segregated locals, municipal and company police often arrested black and white union officials for violating city

segregation laws.¹¹

Black workers were the union's strongest adherents during the formative years. Indeed, Birmingham blacks tended to view SWOC's campaign as a crusade for racial justice: as early as January 1937, the NAACP organized several rallies in support of SWOC, and a handful of Birmingham's most prominent black clergymen offered church space for union meetings. Even AME bishop B. G. Shaw called on blacks to "enter wholeheartedly the labor unions" only months after SWOC was launched. As Rob Hall put it, for blacks the CIO drive "was like a second coming of Christ."¹²

Once in the union, many black steel workers refused to accept a passive role in SWOC affairs, taking every opportunity to assert themselves. This active, sometimes aggressive presence of blacks caused resentment from some white rank-and-file members and provoked accusations of Communism from several corners. Recalling his early years as a SWOC organizer, Hosea Hudson recorded in his memoirs some two decades later that his local was looked upon "as Red because in that local there was a big group of [militant] Negro members that would stand up and make their [voices] heard in their meeting in the face of some of the white [supremacists]." Yet, the most vocal and "militant" contingent of black workers in SWOC *were* Communists. Among the leading Communists on SWOC's payroll in 1936 were Ebb Cox, who was also a local UMWA leader; Joe Howard, an active Party organizer since 1931; and C. Dave Smith, formerly of the Tarrant City Relief Workers League. Other Birmingham Party members were elected by the rank-and-file to responsible positions within SWOC. In February 1937, Hosea Hudson was elected recording secretary for Ensley Local 1489. Black Communists tended to be more vocal than other union members because most were well informed about labor issues and had had experience speaking in public and administering meetings. Black Communist Henry O. Mayfield, a leading CIO organizer in both coal and steel, remembered that black workers "trained the white workers in the struggle." "Sometimes we did not know how to vote on a motion or make a motion. Some of the men serving on grievance committees could not read or write; but they knew what to talk about when they met with the boss, and they were 'tough' and would never back down. During contract time the Negro workers took the lead in working out the contracts. The few white workers in the locals were afraid to attend meetings or serve on committees." In order to maintain smooth relations within the union, however, Communists in the CIO kept their political affiliations to themselves, although this did not stop them from developing distinguished reputations in the labor movement. As one ex-steel worker succinctly put it, "If it wasn't for Ebb Cox ... we never would

have got a union.”¹³

Black workers, who constituted nearly 50 percent of Jefferson County's steel workers, had much to gain from SWOC's success. They were not only the lowest paid—earning sixteen to eighteen cents an hour in the mid-1930s—but were almost always either trough men or line men or were assigned to common tasks such as trash detail, labor gangs, or ditch digging. With few opportunities for upward mobility, black workers toiled ten to twelve hours per day in over one-hundred-degree heat, frequently amid toxic and combustible galvanizing materials. Moreover, arbitrary definitions of skill often masked racial discrimination; it was not uncommon for a black worker considered unskilled to train whites in skilled jobs, although the former would continue to receive wages commensurate to common labor. Therefore, while SWOC appeared to offer blacks a vehicle for upward mobility in the workplace, skilled white workers (at first) saw the union as a threat to their occupational status.¹⁴

For these reasons white workers were initially reluctant to join SWOC, but as winter approached, an unexpected turn of events compelled a change of heart. In October 1936, seventeen thousand employees of TCI's predominantly white company unions threatened to strike for wage increases. Small increases were granted the following month, but many of the company union members were dissatisfied with the agreement and defected to SWOC. By December, some SWOC members felt emboldened enough to test the waters. On Christmas Eve 1936, black steel workers at Birmingham's American Casting Company, led by Communists Joe Howard and C. Dave Smith, organized Alabama's first sit-down strike in history. The strike ended a few days later, after company officials agreed to a substantial settlement that included a 20 percent wage increase and time and a half for overtime.¹⁵

Despite the strike's stunning success, SWOC leadership promptly fired both Howard and Smith, ostensibly for acting without authorization. The harsh, punitive measures meted out to the two Communist leaders had more to do with the sit-down tactics than the strike itself. A few weeks after the incident, William Mitch and Noel Beddow testified before a legislative committee to discuss a bill being introduced that would have made labor unions liable for property damaged during a strike. Although Mitch opposed the bill, he used the opportunity to clearly state his position on sit-down strike tactics. “If sit-down strikes are used in Alabama,” he told the committee, “I will do everything in my power to get the workers to leave the property.” Noel Beddow, who scorned the use of sit-down tactics, testified that new legislation was not necessary since existing laws could be applied

in those circumstances. SWOC's official position on sit-down tactics, however, did not seem to concern Birmingham's steel workers. On February 4, the day after Mitch and Beddow had registered their opposition to sit-down tactics, 420 black workers employed by the Birmingham Stove and Range Company shut down their machines, dropped to the shop floor, and refused to budge. Mitch and Beddow swiftly intervened and persuaded the strikers to leave the premises, although they failed to convince them to return to work. When the strike was finally settled a month later, the employees won substantial wage concessions, union recognition, and a workweek reduced from fifty-six to forty-five hours.¹⁶

In the long run, however, unauthorized strikes and sit-down tactics were rare occurrences in Birmingham's steel mills. Within a relatively short span of time, SWOC won recognition from most Alabama steel companies and gained the necessary strength to negotiate contracts without having to strike. More significantly, sixteen days after John L. Lewis had negotiated a union contract with Myron C. Taylor, chairman of the board for U.S. Steel, TCI followed suit, signing its own contract with Mitch and Beddow on March 18, 1937.¹⁷

The political climate in the South made it virtually impossible for Communists to work openly inside most CIO unions, the one exception being the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. A union with a longstanding radical tradition, Party organizers, for the most part, had operated openly within Mine Mill since 1934. Unlike the UMWA under William Mitch, Mine Mill began the CIO era in an especially weakened state, having lost a series of strikes in 1934. While most white ore miners chose the company-controlled Brotherhood of Captive Miners, Mine Mill slowly rebuilt itself almost exclusively with black support. More blacks were elected to leadership positions within Mine Mill than any other CIO union, and its policy of racial egalitarianism remained unmatched. The preponderance of blacks partly accounts for the union's progressive policies with respect to race, but the growing influence of Communists, especially after the election of Reid Robinson to international president in 1936, also helps explain the union's increasingly leftward shift. Originally an anti-Communist, Reid subsequently altered his views and moved within the Party's orbit during the Popular Front, eventually appointing Communists to local and regional leadership positions within Mine Mill.¹⁸



Sit-down strike, American Casting Company, Birmingham, 1937 (courtesy Alabama magazine)

Having disbanded its mine units and rank-and-file committees, the Party now influenced Mine Mill from top to bottom. Some of the union's most eminent leaders in Alabama were Communists, including Mike Ross, Alton Lawrence, and Van Jones—all of whom had been either elected or appointed to union posts during the Popular Front. Mine Mill officials occasionally invited local radicals to union meetings as guest speakers, openly engaged in nonunion political activity, and even sent some of their organizers to the Highlander Folk School for training.¹⁹ White ore miner Homer Wilson later testified before HUAC that he had been fully aware of the Party's role in Mine Mill, but he “felt that there wasn't any fight on between me and the Communist Party at that time. I didn't really know that the Communist Party was part of the State Department of Russia. I thought it was a group of people who were actually trying to better the working class of people in this country and so therefore I didn't fight them, but I just went along and recognized that they were there and give them the right to exist at that time.”²⁰

Wilson's testimony reveals a stark disparity between his personal experiences and HUAC's blanket description of the Party's presumed agenda. Individual Communists had impressed Wilson by their overall concern for the general welfare of working people in and out of the union. Van Jones, Mike Ross, and Alton Lawrence attempted to tackle several political issues affecting Alabama's working class—issues that would eventually become central to the CIO Political Action

Committee's agenda. Late in 1938, Van Jones developed labor committees to investigate, and possibly draft, pro-labor legislation for the state of Alabama, and he continually lobbied state legislators on behalf of organized labor.²¹

Energized by new leadership, Mine Mill in Alabama called its first strike after two years of relative silence. The strike was sparked by the announcement of a company incentive plan that would have resulted in the dismissal of at least two hundred workers. Soon after miners walked off their jobs on May 31, 1936, mine operators in Bessemer locked out union members and evicted most strikers from company-owned homes. Red Mountain erupted into violence as gun battles raged between striking miners and deputies escorting members of the Brotherhood of Captive Miners. Denied WPA assistance and lacking a sufficient strike fund, Mine Mill was forced to concede defeat a few weeks later. TCI officials retaliated as soon as the strike ended, firing 160 returning ore miners without explanation.²² Nearly a year later, when circumstances seemed hopeless, the NLRB ordered TCI to reinstate the discharged miners and to pay back wages amounting to \$102,050. The NLRB decision led to Mine Mill's first collective bargaining contract in Alabama, signed on October 6, 1938. Not surprisingly, the contract increased union support and attracted dozens of white workers who had defected from the Brotherhood of Captive Miners. But the union's problems were far from solved. TCI simply hired more white miners and enforced segregation practices with greater vigor, and the brotherhood adopted a brand new face in 1939 when it changed its name to the Red Ore Miners and affiliated with the AFL, thus giving it the kind of legitimacy it could not have earned as a company union. Mine Mill remained primarily black and therefore vulnerable to company tactics of racial polarization and red-baiting that would last well past World War II.²³

The Central Committee's decision to dismantle its rank-and-file committees and subordinate the Party's broader goals to the needs of industrial unionism undeniably opened doors for individual Communists, who otherwise might have been ostracized by all but a few rank-and-file militants. But in the long run, such a policy cost the Party dearly, both in numerical and political strength. As several scholars have suggested, the Party's loss of identity within the CIO hastened its eventual downfall in the labor movement after World War II. By assuming primary roles as New Deal labor bureaucrats and dutiful organizers, most Communists became indistinguishable from other labor leaders. Industrial workers, therefore, really had little

incentive to become Communists and devote time and energy to an organization that merely preached the CIO's message.²⁴

The zeal with which Communists threw themselves into CIO organizing also exacted a costly toll from the Alabama cadre, especially black Party organizers. Fifty years later, Hosea Hudson declared simply that “everyone got soaked up in the union.” As Communists devoted more and more time to building the CIO, the Party's role as an autonomous organization seemed less important. Yet, Alabama Communists active in the CIO did not give up the principles that had attracted them to the Party in the first place, nor had the Party's “loss of identity” rendered it an irrelevant vehicle for black working-class opposition. As Rob Hall explained, during the CIO era the “Party became smaller,” not because blacks “abandoned the Party,” but because “the Party's work was in the CIO.”²⁵ Behind Hall's words lay a very complicated story that has as much to do with the peculiar nature of Southern black working-class radicalism and the CIO's social character as anything else, including the Party's own failings.

Black Birmingham Communists, for the most part, did not (and often could not) become pure union bureaucrats in the way that their comrades had in Northern and Western CIO unions. Leaders of the Birmingham Industrial Union Council were still far more conservative compared with the rest of the country, particularly on issues related to racial equality. (When Communists presented resolutions at the first CIO convention in Birmingham endorsing federal antilynching legislation and urging the state of Alabama to drop the case against the Scottsboro defendants, both resolutions were summarily rejected by the CIO executive council.) In this respect, although black Communists had to hide their political affiliations, they nevertheless remained outspoken rebels on racial issues. And because the CIO was, by necessity, an interracial movement whose most supportive base consisted of African-Americans, individual Communists secured considerable rank-and-file support for their agenda. Both Mine Mill and the UMWA, for example, launched mass voter registration drives in an effort to increase black and poor white political participation, and several Mine Mill locals organized voter registration workshops that were intended to inform union members of their legal and constitutional rights.²⁶

The CIO's stand on these issues and the realization that black workers could exercise some power within their unions, especially Mine Mill, SWOC, and UMWA, did more to wed Communists to the

labor movement than Party directives. Indeed, for many black radicals the CIO was just another Communist auxiliary, leading some Communists and ex-ILD militants to confuse union meetings with Party meetings. Hosea Hudson remembers that, “a lot of these members who weren't developed, went in the CIO and the white folks talking to members in the CIO like we was talking to them in the Party. And they thought they was Party people, talking about ‘Comrades!’ A whole lot exposed themselves. . . . These red-baiters and Ku Kluxers exposed a whole lot of our people.”²⁷

The CIO's progressive agenda as well as its strength relative to the CP probably convinced many radicals to devote *all* of their time to union work. But most veteran black Communists who also held leadership positions in the labor movement did not separate CIO work from Party work. Individuals such as Hudson, Henry O. Mayfield, and Andy Brown urged union members to join the anti-poll-tax campaign, register to vote, read the *New South* and the *Daily Worker*, and attend nonunion political functions. On the other hand, some Birmingham Communist leaders and many more rank-and-file activists felt Party work and union work were irreconcilable. Some very capable Communist organizers quit the Party because the CIO, in their opinion, offered better opportunities for personal and community advancement. Ebb Cox, for example, left the CP almost as soon as he had become Birmingham's highest-ranking black CIO organizer, and his newly acquired role as the labor movement's leading black voice (he even had his own column in the *CIO News Digest* titled “Negroes in the Labor Movement”) compelled him to adopt a cool stance toward the Communist Party. Occasionally he endorsed CP positions on social and political issues, but he clearly avoided taking stands that would jeopardize his status. For Cox, the CIO was not only more effective as a vehicle for social contestation, but it fulfilled personal aspirations that would have been out of his reach had he stayed in the Party.²⁸

The CIO appealed to the Party's rank-and-file in other ways as well. Union organizers escaped the kind of brutal repression that had threatened the lives of Communists years earlier, and CIO members—especially whites—did not have to pay the dear price of social ostracism that continued to be exacted from Party members. But perhaps the greatest inducement, particularly for black working people, was the CIO's unique social and cultural environment—a milieu that blacks themselves helped to create. Black workers transformed SWOC and Mine Mill at the grass roots in the same way they had altered the Communist Party during the early 1930s, but the impact was far greater in the industrial labor movement. The CIO's most radical industrial union, Mine Mill, absorbed the very black religious traditions that had informed many Alabama Communists. In

the course of an average meeting, the predominantly black locals would pile into a sympathetic black church and preface union business with a religious hymn, slightly altered to fit the occasion (“Bill Mitch is Our Leader / We Shall Not Be Moved”). The religious spirit spilled over into speeches and discussions, as is evident in the following description of a Mine Mill meeting in Bessemer:

It was an “open meeting,” and Brother Harris (formerly minister) was there to preach a sermon on the goodness of unions and why people ought to join them. His was the shouting, epigrammatic style of the evangelist. If you substitute “God” for “union,” “devil” for “employer” and “hell” for “unorganized” you would have had a rousing sermon. The illustrations, minus their profanity, might well have been used to show the power and goodness of God instead of the union. And his “why not join” was so much in the church tone, I was afraid he was going to have us sing the hymn of invitation.

During the CIO's formative years, Mine Mill members forced several company preachers out of business, hired their own pastors, and built their own churches, and a few men of the cloth held responsible positions as union organizers, many of whom worked closely with known Communists.²⁹

Like the Party, the CIO in Birmingham was enveloped by the black community's tradition of song. “We'd sing at the union meetings,” recalled Bessemer iron ore worker Anderson Underwood, “we'd just be singing at the union. There's just be a crowd of folks there, and we'd just sing and have a big time.” Rooted in the same gospel past that begat Party songs such as “The Scottsboro Song” and “We Got A Stone,” CIO members added familiar spirituals such as “Hold the Fort” and “We Shall Not Be Moved” to the union's vast repertoire, frequently altering the lyrics. During the late 1930s, SWOC even had its own labor vocal group known as the Bessemer Big Four Quartet. Made up of black gospel singers who had sung with the West Highland Jubilee Singers during the 1920s, the Bessemer Big Four Quartet performed at union meetings and was heard occasionally on local radio broadcasts.³⁰

Singing eventually became the Alabama CIO's cultural cornerstone, and members from all over the state were encouraged to articulate the union's message through song. A woman who sat on the union label committee of the Birmingham Industrial Union Council put new lyrics to the hymn “Near the Cross” and came up with “The CIO Workers

Song.” One stanza expressed both the optimism and the importance of solidarity in the struggle to improve conditions:

Strength and power, it will mean
to all that join the union.
Stand with the masses great and
strong, say I joined the CIO.
CIO, CIO, That is the organization,
Watch the conditions all around
Since we joined the union. . . .³¹

On the picket lines CIO organizers added lyrics to simple nursery rhymes or popular songs in order to incorporate as many people as possible into the social act of singing, thus constructing a sense of solidarity that could not have been generated simply by holding signs or marching in circles. Ironically, Southern labor activists took a few songs traditionally deemed racist or distasteful to blacks and transformed them into radical union songs. “Dixie” was reborn as “Look Ahead, Working Man”:

Now we're all together in the CIO
They cannot keep our wages low,
Look ahead, look ahead, look ahead, Union man.
For the time has come when we take our stand,
With union men throughout the land,
Look ahead, look ahead, look ahead, Union man.³²

The Communist Party's national and international connections undoubtedly contributed songs such as “Internationale,” “Solidarity Forever,” and countless others to its locally derived musical repertoire. The same can be said for the CIO. The links between union locals and the emphasis on national and international solidarity allowed for greater cultural exchange. One song based on the melody of “Tah Rah Rah Boom Dee Ay” migrated from the North and West and eventually entered the red ore mines of Birmingham:

Tah rah rah boom dee ay
Ain't got a word to say
He chizzled down my pay,
then took my job away.
Boom went the boom one day.

It made a noise that way.
I wish that I'd be wise.
Next time I'll organize.³³

The Highlander Folk School was perhaps the CIO's richest source for Southern labor songs. The school's educators not only trained labor organizers from across the South but collected, disseminated, and often wrote labor songs. The vast majority of these songs were unaltered spirituals such as "Couldn't Hear Nobody Pray" and "Come on to the Buryin'," but radicalized hymns were quite common. "Stand up For Jesus" served as the melody for Ethel Comer's "Stand Up! Ye Workers," a lively tune reminiscent of the IWW:

Arise! Arise! Ye toilers,
The strife will not be long;
This day the noise of battle
The next the victor's song.
All ye that slave for wages
Stand up and break your chains!
Unite in ONE BIG UNION
You've got a world to gain!³⁴

In essence, the CIO in Birmingham was not just another federation of labor organizations. Unions such as SWOC, Mine Mill, and the UMW evolved during their formative years as broad-based social movements, enriched with Southern cultural traditions and fortified by an unusually pronounced civil rights agenda. Ironically, although Communists helped pave the way for such a movement, a somewhat radicalized CIO negatively affected the continued growth of the Party in Birmingham. As the Popular Front tended to deemphasize its radical agenda, the old Alabama Third Period militancy was partly reborn again within the ranks of the CIO. Of course, when we compare their broader goals and strategies, the Communists remained to the left of CIO leadership, but the lines between the two were becoming increasingly blurred. Yet, the CIO offered activists strength in numbers, security, interracial unity, and legitimacy—goals that Alabama Communists had hoped to achieve through the Popular Front. It should not be surprising, therefore, that black Communists—regardless of their level of dedication to the Party—devoted more time and energy to the CIO, thus contributing to the decline in black participation in the Party. Most Birmingham blacks who left the Party during the Popular Front were not disillusioned with the goals or ideals of the movement; they simply found a better vehicle through

which to realize these goals. For some black working people, the CIO was the first real alternative to the Communist Party; for others the CIO became the Party.

Nevertheless, Third Period radicalism did not die entirely, nor did the CIO consume the energies of every Alabama radical. Indeed, as local Communist leaders sought to befriend Southern liberals or become labor bureaucrats, the spirit of the underground stubbornly persisted in the rebellions of WPA workers and in the protracted struggles of the SCU.

Chapter Eight: Old Slaves, New Deal

Communists and the WPA

We have no freedom of which the land Boasts [sic] about for the W.P.A. workers are [like] Slaves. . . . Man if that is freedom then give me prison where I will get plenty to eat, if some change is not made there will be mob violence here in a week or 10 days for the men are joining orders that are suppose to help them and you know it is communist at work among the Negros [sic] and it is going to cause trouble.

—*Birmingham WPA foreman to President Roosevelt, 1935*

In spite of all their efforts to present a respectable image and to nurture friendly relations with Southern liberals and organized labor, Alabama Communists could not ignore the rising tide of workers' dissent that was sweeping the federal government's newest relief agency, the Works Progress Administration. Activated in 1935 to provide emergency work relief through public works, the WPA in Alabama was launched with very little direction or planning. Jobs varied from bridge building and road work to cotton picking and gardening, for which workers received wages well below union rates and sometimes even below prevailing nonunion wages. Monthly wages for unskilled WPA workers ranged from thirty dollars per month in Birmingham to nineteen dollars per month in rural Alabama. The rural-urban differential allowed local WPA administrators to pay a Birmingham worker the city's prevailing rate and then send him or her out to the rural areas at a lower wage. In many cases, reassignment from the countryside to the city did not result in a proper wage adjustment, thus forcing many workers, especially blacks, to toil on Birmingham WPA projects for a minuscule nineteen dollars per month.¹

The combination of low wages and poor working conditions bred a militant relief workers' movement reminiscent of the 1934 strike wave. Several spontaneous uprisings on WPA projects rekindled the militant spirit of the early 1930s and literally swept Alabama Communists into the fray, giving birth to what was perhaps their most incongruous campaign during the Popular Front. Montgomery Party

members organized a mass demonstration of WPA workers in August of 1935 to protest the prevailing wage rates and demand a minimum of forty cents per hour, though police intervention brought the gathering to an abrupt close. In Birmingham, a handful of Communists assisted a predominantly white group of WPA workers who had not received wages in three weeks. The group marched on the local relief headquarters, bolted through the door, and threatened to use violence if they did not receive at least a grocery order. By the time police arrived, approximately fifty demonstrators had broken into the government surplus store and “selected what food they could carry.”²

By the summer's end, WPA workers in Jefferson and Walker counties were showing signs of mounting frustration over low wages and intolerable working conditions. One frightened WPA foreman in Birmingham warned that his workers resented “working for almost nothing” and had reached a point where “they will kill at the drop of a hat and they will get us foremen first for they think we are to blame.” In September a series of proposed wage cuts prompted thirty-five hundred WPA workers in Walker County to walk off their jobs in disgust. Led by Clayton Norris, district president of the International Hod Carriers, Building and Common Laborers Union of America, the strike was not recognized by either WPA administrators or the ASFL. Indeed, two months earlier, officers of the ASFL had signed an agreement with state relief administrator Thad Holt designating all strikes on WPA projects as antigovernment and therefore illegal. And the Hod Carriers’ reputation for militancy only solidified WPA administrators’ denunciation of the strike. In the words of one WPA official, the union “has always been a difficult one.”³

During the strike, WPA officials refused to talk to Norris, choosing instead to negotiate with ASFL spokesman V. C. Finch, whose strategy was to persuade strikers to return to work at the original pay scale. The striking WPA workers held a mass meeting at the Walker County courthouse under Norris's leadership and demanded an hourly minimum wage of thirty cents, free transportation to and from the projects, regular paydays at two-week intervals, and payment for commuting time. With little support and no strike fund, the strikers began to break ranks after three weeks, and when police arrested Norris—a convicted felon—for parole violation, the strike came to an abrupt end. But it was not all for naught: WPA administrators rescinded the proposed wage reductions, reduced hours from 160 to 116 per month, and increased wages, ranging from fifteen to twenty-seven cents per hour, for some returning workers.⁴

Within a matter of months, discontent had shifted from Walker to Jefferson County. On March 24, 1936, WPA officials announced that

all Jefferson County workers on “non-fixed cost” projects were to be reduced to half-time with corresponding reductions in pay, and at least eight thousand workers would be suspended without pay. A committee from the district council of the Hod Carriers, composed of district officers W. J. O’Neal, John Steele, and black Communist labor organizer Ebb Cox, tried to negotiate a settlement with WPA administrator Ray Crow; but when their efforts failed, they elected to strike. On April 15, 1936, about twelve hundred WPA workers in Birmingham and Bessemer left their jobs, and two days later another one thousand relief workers in Jefferson and Shelby counties joined the strike. Their principal demands included a reversal of the suspension order, a 10 percent wage increase, and the removal of Ray Crow, whom WPA workers felt expressed antilabor attitudes.⁵

Since the walkout technically constituted a “strike against the government,” TCI police, armed foremen, and the local sheriff aggressively sought to restore law and order. One of the most violent confrontations occurred at a WPA-sponsored women’s sewing project, where Communists Belle Logan and Kenneth Bridenthal had organized pickets of black women strikers. Police and gangs of white men toting ax handles arrived on the scene and beat several black women senseless. “The men in charge of the project,” reported Belle Logan, “had a Government truck driven up onto the sidewalk into the midst of the women, and the [WPA] guards came over with sticks and clubs and began to beat the colored women, seriously injuring three of them.” The repression hastened the strike’s end, which occurred within a few days. When it was all over, the county administrator agreed to withdraw the curtailment order but refused to raise wages.⁶

Less than a month after the strike, the state WPA administration laid off, without warning, five thousand workers, twenty-two hundred in Jefferson County alone, and reduced monthly cash relief allowances from \$4.89 to a paltry \$1.59. By the summer of 1936, wages and working conditions had deteriorated to such an extent that skilled white workers in Birmingham were being paid unskilled wages. In Walker County, WPA officials paid unskilled laborers a mere \$22.00 per month for 116 hours of work. Black women, many of whom had been transferred from sewing projects to more physically exacting assignments, had registered numerous complaints with federal authorities. A black woman on a WPA beautification project near Bessemer who, along with other black women, had to dig trenches, remove rocks, and repair roads irrespective of the weather, probably summed up the feelings of her fellow workers when she wrote, “We are colored women and [are] treat [*sic*] worse than stock.”⁷

Just when Alabama’s relief workers seemed most in need of

unionization, the Hod Carriers' increasingly conservative leadership had begun to withdraw from the WPA altogether. By the end of 1936, it had even adopted the ASFL's policy of opposing strikes on WPA projects. Shocked and disappointed by the Hod Carriers' retreat, Alabama Party leaders nevertheless remained silent in their criticisms so as not to undermine chances for a Communist-labor alliance. Rather than challenge ASFL leadership or attempt to radicalize the Hod Carriers at the rank-and-file level, Communists continued to organize relief workers independently. In December, WPA laborers in Fairfield, under Communist leadership, won the right to free transportation to and from work by threatening to strike. A few months later, Communist organizer Kenneth Bridenthal founded a Birmingham chapter of the Amalgamated Association of State and United States Government Relief Workers of North America. Beyond a few mass meetings, however, the short-lived relief workers' union was essentially a paper organization.⁸

The Party's growing national prominence within the Workers Alliance of America, a largely Socialist-led unemployed and relief workers' movement, offered Birmingham Communists fresh opportunities for reorganizing WPA workers. At the alliance's founding convention in 1935, many of its rank-and-file members wholeheartedly supported the Popular Front and elected several Communists to leadership posts, and within a year the alliance merged with the CP-led unemployed councils.⁹ These dramatic changes in leadership and outlook, however, were slow to reach Alabama. When Birmingham's almost exclusively white Local 1 of the Workers Alliance received a charter in 1936, it was both organizationally weak and politically conservative. Aside from writing grievance letters to WPA officials, the Birmingham Workers Alliance had virtually no public presence before 1937.¹⁰

In the spring of 1937, the national executive board of the Workers Alliance sent John Donovan, a Communist and former New Dealer from Washington, D.C., to reorganize the Birmingham local. After some prodding by Donovan, Henry O. Mayfield and Hosea Hudson agreed one summer night to attend an alliance meeting in Fairfield, Alabama. If Donovan had intended to stir things up a bit by sending black radicals into the conservative white Workers Alliance, then his plan worked quite well. Unaccustomed to the presence of assertive black men, the chairman of the Fairfield local led a bewildered, disgusted group of white workers out of the meeting hall and out of the organization. About two months later, a progressive, interracial slate of candidates was elected to fill the recently vacated offices of Birmingham Local 1. James D. Howell was elected president, Hosea Hudson was chosen to serve as vice-president, and a black woman,

Edwina Collins, assumed the duties of recording secretary. Because its meetings were integrated and it strongly supported the anti-poll-tax movement and encouraged black workers to register to vote, the alliance immediately earned a reputation as a “Communist” organization. Even AFL leaders, most of whom dismissed the Workers Alliance as a Communist front, directed most of their criticisms at its racial policies. On at least one occasion, anti-Communist trade union activists violently disrupted a Birmingham alliance meeting in 1938.¹¹

The Communist-led unemployed councils of the early 1930s survived red-baiting from all corners, in large part because the Party's role in those days was never hidden. But because the CP veiled its connections to the Workers Alliance as part of its Popular Front strategy, accusations of Communist “domination” generated disunity and distrust within the union, particularly since the alliance opened its doors to white-collar professionals. These white-collar workers tended to be more sensitive to the incessant red-scare tactics than were unemployed industrial workers. Because racial equality and Communism were seen as two sides of the same coin, many whites left the alliance on the pretext that its racial practices alone proved it was a Communist front. Less than a year after Birmingham Communists became active in the Workers Alliance, white flight began to take its toll: in 1938 blacks comprised 60 percent of Local 1.¹²

Yet, despite the losses in white membership, the pervasive red-baiting, and the internal dissension, the Jefferson County Workers Alliance momentarily flowered in both size and prominence. At a huge Workers Alliance rally in July 1938, at which forty-five hundred people crowded around the Jefferson County courthouse steps, national president David Lasser shared the podium with Alabama congressman Luther Patrick and labor leader William Mitch. With a peak membership of about four thousand, by 1938 twenty-seven locals had been formed under the jurisdiction of the Jefferson County council of the Workers Alliance. James Howell, former president of Local 1, was elected president of the county council, and Hudson was the members' choice for vice-president. The position of recording secretary was filled by Ethel Lee Goodman, a young black woman from East Birmingham and recent Party recruit.¹³

Seeking to turn the alliance into more of an activist movement, the new county leadership adopted many of the strategies and tactics used by the unemployed councils during the early 1930s. Local alliance organizers confronted the Department of Water and Power when individual workers faced utilities shutoffs, created committees to settle problems with relief officials, and tried to deal directly with local WPA authorities regarding working conditions, wages, and pay

schedules.¹⁴ But because the Party's support for the New Deal had been consolidated, especially during 1938, Communist leadership now discouraged wildcat strikes and walkouts on WPA projects. Moreover, the Workers Alliance at the national level developed a narrower approach to activism than the Party had originally conceived, evolving into essentially a "trade union for the WPA workers." Such an approach proved largely ineffective because, as a government relief agency, the WPA did not depend on profits and a continuous flow of labor for its survival. Alliance members were still subject to the whims and caprices of local administrators. As one Bessemer woman put it, local authorities continued to "resort to all sorts of excuse and [pretexts] for denying relief or for dropping Negroes from the reliefs rolls."¹⁵

Black women had the most difficulty maintaining WPA jobs. The demand for household domestic labor had grown precipitously by 1938—in part a sign of economic recovery. WPA administrators responded to the growing need for domestic workers by removing hundreds of black women from the work relief rolls. Although officials believed household labor offered sufficient opportunities for unemployed women, most black women resented their removal from the WPA rolls and bitterly resisted domestic work. While relief work was no picnic for black women, the choice between federal relief work and toiling ten hours or more as a domestic was easy to make: in 1939, over 60 percent of Birmingham's domestic workers earned less than \$200 per year. After having been laid off from a WPA sewing project, one black Mobile woman implored President Roosevelt to have her assigned to some other project since "they do not pay a living wage in the home." A Montgomery woman in similar circumstances resolved to return to the relief rolls or obtain a better job rather than resume housekeeping for another white family. "I am hungry," she informed the president, "and I have walked the streets until I am barefooted trying to get me some work." Appealing to Eleanor Roosevelt for assistance after having been fired from a WPA project in Bessemer, one black woman concluded simply that "here in Bessemer the conditions of us Negro females is the most pitful [*sic*] of anywhere in America."¹⁶

A decision by the national administration of the WPA practically put an end to the Workers Alliance. In the spring of 1939, all WPA workers who had been on the program for at least eighteen continuous months were suspended and asked to reapply within thirty days. The Alabama WPA administration could not have reprocessed the majority of suspended workers within the thirty-day grace period, and thus the Workers Alliance lost its organizational base within a few weeks. Five months after the suspension, the Jefferson County

Workers Alliance was reduced to less than one thousand members.¹⁷

With the Workers Alliance already on its last leg, the resurgence of anti-Communism spurred by the Dies Committee hearings only hastened the impending outcome. In 1939, as soon as the alliance appeared on the Dies Committee's list of "Communist front" organizations, the WPA mandated that relief workers sign allegiance cards prohibiting membership "in any organization that advocates the overthrow of the Government of the United States by force or violence." In Gadsden, Alabama, the Communist issue prompted the formation of the Gadsden United WPA Workers, which denounced the alliance as a Communist front. In Jefferson County, anti-Communism and racial conservatism on the part of white members split the alliance in half. James D. Howell still held the presidency in 1940, but he moved out of Birmingham and concentrated his efforts on white-collar and skilled workers exclusively. Hosea Hudson and Ethel Lee Goodman tried to hold the Birmingham group together, which by this time consisted entirely of black workers. By the winter of 1939–40, only the Negro Masonic Temple allowed alliance members access to a meeting hall. In Hudson's words, this "hand full of Negroes [*sic*]" were "the last to leave the sinking ship in a state of confushion." The collapse of the Workers Alliance in Alabama was soon followed by its dissolution nationally in 1941.¹⁸

The brief history of the Workers Alliance reveals some of the limitations of Popular Front politics in the Deep South. Communists nationwide were already placed in the ironic position of having to fight for improvements within the WPA while simultaneously trying to build an alliance with the WPA's creators.¹⁹ But as discontented Alabama relief workers grew increasingly militant, it became exceedingly difficult to resolve these two contradictory tendencies. Indeed, in an era when the Communist Party's moderate turn had alienated black workers and the CIO had begun to embody the radical traditions of the early 1930s, the Workers Alliance might have augmented the Party's dwindling membership rolls. Like the unemployed councils several years later, it might have even provided the foundation for rebuilding the Communist Party in black working-class communities.

But times, and politics, had changed. The Workers Alliance only slightly resembled the predominantly black, underground, neighborhood-based unemployed movement of the early 1930s. It opened its doors to all WPA employees, including white-collar professionals who had no interest in the fight for racial justice and equality and even less tolerance for Communists. Although radicals exercised considerable influence in the Jefferson County Workers

Alliance, the Party eventually adopted a somewhat accommodating political posture—much like its position with respect to the CIO. For the most part, Party leaders elected to limit alliance politics to “bread and butter” issues, cater to the needs of white-collar workers, and subordinate the Party's identity—all to ensure harmonious relations with organized labor, Southern liberals, and the middle class. Unfortunately, the long-sought-after alliance proved more elusive than Alabama Party leaders had imagined.

Chapter Nine: The Popular Front in Rural Alabama

In retrospect, I believe that those responsible for liquidating the Sharecroppers Union were motivated by a sort of crude trade union economism, a desire to restrict the struggle of Black soil tillers to economic issues . . . and a feeling that the existence of an independent and mainly Black union with the explosive potential of the Sharecroppers Union would frighten off our new democratic front allies: the Roosevelt New Dealers, the Southern moderates and the CIO leadership.

—Harry Haywood

If the rise and demise of social movements can be explained in terms of “correct” versus “incorrect” theoretical positions, then the observations of black ex-Communist Harry Haywood would make perfect sense. By 1937 most Central Committee members thought Alabama's underground rural union was a blemish on the Party's new liberal face. But to reduce the SCU's decline to political machinations from afar is to miss the significance of local and national factors, particularly transformations caused by federal intervention in cotton production, the emergence of the Socialist-led STFU, the radicalization of the National Farmers' Union movement, and the SCU's inability to mitigate antiunion repression. The specific policies developed and implemented by SCU leadership must be seen as a response to a multiplicity of political and economic factors.

Described glowingly in 1932 as the Southern vanguard in the fight for self-determination, the SCU led by Al Murphy came under severe criticism two years later for its failure to recruit even a single white farmer. By December 1934, the Central Committee tried to remedy the situation by replacing Murphy with white Communist and veteran trade union organizer Clyde Johnson, who was in New York at the time recovering from a near-fatal beating he had received at the hands of Birmingham police. Johnson had expressed an interest in rural work even before he was assigned to Birmingham. When he first moved South in 1933, he worked for the Farm Holiday Association in Rome, Georgia, before he was run out of the county, and during his brief respite in New York, Johnson had begun to organize dairy workers on Long Island. With renewed enthusiasm, though still a little weak from pneumonia he had contracted in jail, Johnson drove back

to Alabama with black Tallapoosa Communist Hosea Hart in January 1935.¹

Johnson's appointment was partly intended to legitimize the SCU as an interracial organization at a moment when black-white unity constituted the cornerstone of the united front in the South.² But the Central Committee's intentions did not reflect the thoughts, dreams, and frustrations of the actors involved. Al Murphy, for example, wished to leave his post as SCU secretary as early as 1934, mainly because of the Party's inadequate financial support, and because the tremendous work load (compounded by isolation and a constant threat of violence) placed a great strain on his health. The Party's vacillating attitude toward self-determination in the black belt further contributed to his growing disillusionment; on several occasions he castigated national leadership for not distributing the *Liberator* in the South. Therefore, late in 1934 Murphy left the black belt for good and headed for New York. (A few months later, he boarded a ship for Moscow as a delegate to the Seventh World Congress of the Communist International.) Likewise, Johnson's eagerness to accept the position had little to do with the Central Committee's reasons for making the appointment. The independent radical did not see himself as an exemplar of interracial harmony for the benefit of the Party's newfound liberal allies, nor did he fit the Southern Popular Front mold. Still in his twenties, the lanky, boyish figure exuded the idealism of his college days, yet possessed the battle scars of the seasoned Birmingham underground. An able and militant labor leader sensitive to the needs of blacks, Johnson was genuinely excited about the prospect of organizing landless farmers and agricultural workers caught up in tumultuous changes brought on by the New Deal.³

Aside from a very brief meeting with Murphy, whom he met for the first and last time, Johnson was given no preparation for his new task. As soon as he settled in Tallapoosa County he adopted the pseudonym "Larry Coleman" and initially signed all of the union's correspondence with Murphy's name so that local authorities could not detect a change in leadership. He later assumed several pen names, including "Tom Burke" and "Albert Jackson" to confuse police and protect his identity. While addressing local meetings in churches and schoolhouses packed to capacity, he discovered firsthand the size and extent of the SCU, particularly in Tallapoosa, Chambers, and Montgomery counties. Curiosity attracted unusually large crowds anxious to meet the new secretary, but the strong showing was also indicative of the union's rapid growth; Johnson discovered twice as many locals as Murphy had originally reported. Recognizing the need for centralization and order, he immediately created an executive board comprised of elected county representatives, with Hosea Hart

(who used the name “Harry Williams” just about everywhere except in his hometown of Dadeville) presiding. Executive meetings were provisionally held in Tallapoosa County but were soon moved to Montgomery once headquarters were reestablished there, although meetings and activities still remained underground. Black Party leaders Charles and Capitola Tasker, for example, produced SCU leaflets with a mimeograph machine they kept hidden in their home and surreptitiously left packages of leaflets at Al Jackson's barbershop (another black Montgomery Communist) for organizers who regularly came by for a “trim.”⁴

The SCU's apparent growth had much to do with the wave of evictions prompted by the Bankhead Cotton Control Act, which made acreage reduction mandatory. Although most tenants were evicted weeks after the last harvest had been picked and baled, landlords generally waited until the new crop had been planted before throwing their tenants off the land. At a moment when tenants were most vulnerable, having to rely on food and cash advances to survive, planters invited the evicted tenants back as wage laborers to chop cotton for as little as thirty cents per day. In counties further south, especially Dallas, Montgomery, and Lowndes, wage laborers received as little as four dollars per month plus board. As one evicted sharecropper explained, “The white landowners will not allow our people to work on shares, nor rent us land. . . . Many of our comrades have nothing to live on and nothing to wear.” In desperation, a black woman Communist asked the *Daily Worker*, “What is we going to do? We do not want to steal if we can get round it. But, dear comrades, your stomach will make you do things you do not want to do. You will be so hungry, and you be bare footed and naked.” Even white tenants were beginning to feel the effects of the Cotton Control Act. In Tallapoosa County, where several white tenant families had been evicted, black SCU members and white farmers met jointly on several occasions to discuss the Bankhead legislation.⁵

Johnson's first major decision was to follow through with Murphy's plan for a cotton choppers' strike in the spring of 1935. Laborers in Lowndes, Tallapoosa, Montgomery, Lee, Randolph, Dallas, and Chambers counties were instructed to leave the fields on May 1 unless they received a daily wage of one dollar. Leaflets were also distributed calling for a ten-hour workday, equal pay for women and youth, and no discrimination against blacks.⁶ The strike was clearly the union's largest campaign to date, encompassing some fifteen hundred laborers spread over thirty-five plantations. As had been the strategy in the past, strikers neither picketed nor engaged in openly militant activities but instead used their wiles to avoid violent confrontation. “If the landlord doesn't give the \$1,” Johnson observed, “the croppers

[would] say that every one else has said they would not work for less than \$ 1 and that they are striking with them. Or that they are afraid to go against the majority. Or that they are too sick to work. The answers usually depend on the terror.”⁷

Where the SCU was relatively strong, mainly Tallapoosa, Lee, and Chambers counties, the cotton choppers won most of their demands and experienced comparatively little violence, but in Lowndes, Montgomery, and particularly Dallas counties, the repression was insurmountable. In Dallas County sixteen SCU members were arrested and several were flogged for taking part in the strike. When black Communist Saul Davis returned to his hometown of Selma to inquire about the sixteen incarcerated SCU members, he was arrested and immediately released into the custody of a hostile mob. Hearing of Davis's disappearance, ILD organizer Robert Washington was dispatched from Birmingham to investigate his arrest and to assist the strikers. On the evening of May 18, Washington experienced a repeat performance of what had happened to his comrade Saul Davis. After spending a night in jail, Washington later testified, “I pleaded with [the sheriff] that I was a stranger in Selma and would like to remain in the station overnight, so that I could take a bus or a train to Birmingham on Monday morning; and he said; ‘I am going to release you, you black son of a bitch, right now.’” Dragged to a side door of the police station and handed over to eight armed men in two automobiles, Washington was driven about fourteen miles beyond the city limits, stripped, and beaten with a leather strap for nearly an hour. Forced to walk to the county line as several men fired shots above his head, he miraculously made it back to Birmingham—alive but writhing in pain and quite shaken. Unbeknownst to Washington at the time, a young ILD organizer named John “Willie” Foster was sent to Selma the very next day to investigate Washington's arrest, but as soon he entered the city, he too was arrested and released to a gang of vigilantes. Unlike Washington and Davis (who also appeared in Birmingham a few days later), Foster was never heard from again.⁸

MEMBERSHIP CARD

SHARE CROPPERS UNION

Union of Share Croppers and Tenants—Negro and White

Southern Headquarters:

P. O. BOX 1813, BIRMINGHAM, ALA.

Name _____

Branch _____

 as

Share Croppers' Union membership card (courtesy Clyde Johnson)

White Communists in Dallas County also fell victim to vigilante violence. With the strike less than two weeks old, Party members Boris Israel (alias Blaine Owen) and Henry "Red" Johnson traveled to Dallas County to obtain a firsthand perspective on the strike's progress. During a meeting of tenants and farm laborers, Selma police officers who had been tipped off about the gathering forcibly entered the house with guns drawn and arrested Israel and Johnson. In the midst of interrogating the two men about their activities, Selma's chief of police tried to impress upon them the importance of crushing all forms of opposition in the black belt: "We got eight niggers to every white man here. . . . We got a hard enough time keeping down trouble without you coming around and stirring things up." When night fell Israel and Johnson were released, only to meet several armed vigilantes outside the police station. After being shuttled into a waiting vehicle, the two white Communists were pummeled continuously for hours as they drifted in and out of consciousness. Arriving at a destination well beyond the city limits, they were stripped bare, tied to a tree, and flogged with heavy rope and a horsewhip while one of their kidnappers pressed lighted matches into their wounds. When the torturous night finally came to an end, their limp yet breathing bodies were dumped on the highway just outside Selma.⁹

The strike was eventually crushed in Dallas County. In Lowndes, where three union organizers were arrested and several suffered brutal beatings, the strikers fared no better. But in the remaining counties the SCU won a dollar per day on most of the targeted plantations, and on others the strikers settled for seventy-five cents plus three meals and free transportation to and from work. The demand for a ten-hour day was honored on only two or three plantations. Dairy workers and plow hands, spurred on by the cotton choppers' strike, also walked off their jobs, some winning weekly wage increases from \$2.50 to \$3.50 while several regular farm hands more than doubled their monthly incomes. Although wage increases were not uniform and only a handful of plantations were affected, these minor victories attracted more union adherents. By the summer of 1935, total membership ballooned to nearly ten thousand. And despite meager funds, Johnson launched the SCU's first organ, the *Union Leader: A Voice of the White and Negro Farm Toilers of the South*. In the spirit of "twentieth century Americanism," its first issue appeared appropriately on the Fourth of July.¹⁰

The cotton choppers' strike provided valuable lessons for Johnson and other rural organizers. Small victories were won by wage laborers and landless farmers who toiled on cotton plantations during picking time, but union organizers realized they could neither stop evictions nor impede the overwhelming repression union members in the black belt faced. Indeed, several weeks after the strike had been declared over, Dallas County SCU leaders were still reeling from the effects of antiradical violence. On July 11, organizer Joe Spinner Johnson was picked up by police and handed over to a gang of vigilantes a few days later. His body was found in an empty field near Greensboro, Alabama.¹¹

In an effort to strengthen the SCU, Johnson and Donald Henderson, a Central Committee member who also served as director of the National Committee for Unity of Rural and Agricultural Workers, sought an alliance with the newly formed STFU. Founded in 1934 by Socialists Henry Clay East and H. L. Mitchell in Tyronza, Arkansas, the STFU resembled the SCU in many respects. Advocating "Land for the Landless," it opposed the AAA and fought evictions, but unlike the Communist Party the STFU did not see the crisis as a class struggle in which the federal government played a duplicitous role in support of the ruling landlords.¹² Nevertheless, as early as November 1934, Al Murphy submitted to Mitchell a united front agreement advocating unity around a common program that included opposition to the Bankhead Cotton Control Act and the Gin Tax Act and support for the Communist-sponsored Farmers' Emergency Relief Bill. The Farmers' Emergency Relief Bill would have repealed the AAA, banned

foreclosures and evictions, and created a farmer-administered relief plan. Although STFU leaders responded favorably to the agreement, the issue of a united front was not raised again until May 1935, when representatives of the two organizations attended a national conference held at Howard University under the auspices of the Joint Committee on National Recovery and Howard's social science department. Following their formal addresses to the participants, Hosea Hart and Clyde Johnson met privately with STFU delegates to discuss the possibility of united action. No formal agreement resulted from the talks, but H. L. Mitchell appeared supportive of the Alabama sharecroppers. After the conference he gratefully noted that the SCU was "giving us much help in explaining to us its methods of work where they have been successful."¹³

In July, Johnson wrote STFU leader J. R. Butler requesting a formal united front agreement between the two organizations, and a month later Johnson and Hart met with Mitchell in Memphis to discuss the possibility of a merger. Mitchell was outwardly enthusiastic but privately had misgivings. After meeting with SCU activists in Lowndes County upon Johnson's invitation, he concluded disdainfully that the "so-called Sharecropper [*sic*] Union of Alabama was practically indistinguishable from the Communist Party." Thus, while the STFU executive board announced its support for the merger, both Mitchell and J.R. Butler worked behind the scenes to ensure that no merger would take place. When Johnson suggested a joint STFU-SCU cotton pickers' strike in August, for example, STFU leadership quietly rejected the idea, but a few weeks later announced plans for its own cotton pickers' strike, independent of the SCU.¹⁴

Nevertheless, Johnson proceeded with plans for a mass cotton pickers' strike. The union's primary goal was to win one dollar per hundred pounds for seasonal pickers. They also demanded a minimum of one dollar per day plus room and board (or two meals and free transportation to and from work) and a ten-hour maximum workday for day laborers; a minimum forty-hour week at twenty cents an hour for rural relief workers; immediate relief for all strikers; no evictions; and equal wages irrespective of race, sex, or age. Recalling the problems faced by the union during the cotton choppers' strike, Johnson took even greater precautions in preparing for the pickers' walkout in August. First, he appealed to the AFU, the STFU, and the AFL to contribute to the SCU's meager strike fund, though none offered much support. Second, anticipating state relief director Thad Holt's order to remove all workers from the relief rolls who refused to pick cotton, as well as similar action by the Montgomery Reemployment Service and the county relief agencies, Johnson tried to organize local relief workers alongside the SCU. In conjunction with

the cotton pickers' strike, Charles Tasker led two mass demonstrations of WPA workers in Montgomery's Exchange Park to demand increases in wages and relief and to oppose the use of relief workers as strike breakers in the cotton fields. Police dispersed both meetings, and the city responded by passing its own criminal anarchy ordinance. In Chambers County the SCU appealed to sixty-five relief workers brought specifically to replace striking labor. It was reported that thirteen of the relief workers simply quit on the spot and the remainder opted to join the strike.¹⁵

As planned, the strike first erupted on J. R. Bell's plantation in Lowndes County, where an estimated twelve hundred tenants, sharecroppers, and farm workers earned a paltry sum of forty cents per hundred pounds. Led by Ed Knight and Ed Bracey, the Lowndes County SCU had apparently recovered from the 1935 choppers' strike and established locals stretching from Hope Hull to Fort Deposit. In July alone, for example, the Lowndes County committee added three hundred members to its ranks. The determination there was tremendous: "There is going to be hell if they try to break up our meeting. We workers on the Bell farm are organized and Mr. Bell or anyone else will catch hell trying to stop us now." And hell it was. On the morning of August 19, J. R. Bell rose only to discover that his cotton bolls were ripe but his fields were empty. He immediately contacted Haynesville sheriff R. E. Woodruff to remedy the situation. When Woodruff and his deputies arrived, they approached SCU organizer Willie Witcher and tried to convince him to call off the strike and return to work. Witcher politely responded in the negative and slowly walked back to his shack on the Bell plantation. Almost as soon as Witcher turned his back, the frustrated sheriff shot him in the thigh and handcuffed and mercilessly beat him before locking him up in the Haynesville jail, his wounds unattended.¹⁶

That evening, Woodruff organized a posse which scoured the county, committing atrocities against strikers and nonstrikers along the way. Jim Press Merriweather and his entire family, all union members, were among the posse's first victims. As soon as the strike began, plantation owner John Frank Bates evicted the Merriweather family, forcing them to move in with Jim's brother Phillip. Then on the night of August 22, Jim Merriweather was captured by the posse, accused of shooting a strike breaker, and summarily executed. According to police reports, Merriweather miraculously broke away from four fully armed men, jumped into a nearby ditch, and picked up a shotgun which he had allegedly planted there earlier. When he fired at the "officers," claimed Sheriff Woodruff, his captors retaliated and killed him. Forcing their way into Phillip Merriweather's home, the mob continued its reign of terror against the rest of his family. Phillip

broke from his captors and escaped down an embankment, but Jim's wife, Annie Mae, was not so lucky. She was stripped, possibly raped, and beaten with a knotted rope while she hung from a wooden beam.¹⁷

Merriweather's murder was part of a larger scheme to assassinate known union leaders, most of whom had been identified by informants. On Labor Day, Sheriff Woodruff and his posse fatally wounded SCU leader Ed Bracey as he tried to escape an ambush, and a few days later the body of Rev. G. Smith Watkins, a Baptist preacher and SCU leader, turned up riddled with buckshot in a nearby swamp. Lowndes County Communist organizer Ed Knight luckily escaped a similar fate; when he returned to his tiny shack late one evening his furniture had been smashed and the mob had left a note on his door warning him that he was next to die.¹⁸ The strike provoked such unbridled violence that many victims were neither strikers nor union supporters. Three unidentified transients suspected of union membership were found dead in a swamp, and dozens of people were rounded up and squeezed into the overcrowded Haynesville jail. In Notasulga, a posse raided a women's missionary convention, which they thought was a guise for a union meeting, and assaulted several women in the process. And three days after Witcher's arrest, vigilantes flogged an elderly Lowndes County woman and her sisters for allegedly providing support for the strike.¹⁹

Antiunion repression was not limited to the rural areas. Searching desperately for the elusive "Albert Jackson," Montgomery police arrested Communists James Cobb, Charles Tasker, and James Jackson. After a brutal interrogation, Jackson and Tasker were ordered to leave Montgomery. Continuing their search, police located and arrested two Albert Jacksons, one being the Party's Montgomery contact and the other an old bootlegger who had no radical associations whatsoever. When it was discovered that neither the bootlegger nor the black Montgomery barber was the SCU leader, the Montgomery police department, in concert with the city's postmaster, tried to trap Clyde Johnson by refusing to accept payment for the union's post office box unless "Albert Jackson" appeared in person.²⁰

The violence evoked an emotional, militant response from union activists. In a resolution to Governor Graves from the Lowndes County committee, signed only "Share Cropper Union, Ala.," the strikers demanded "the freedom [*sic*] of the Negro share Croppers that was shot and arrested for Union activities and carryed to Hayesville [*sic*] Alabama to jail." More than civil liberties were at stake. "This also is

part of the landlords scheme to brake the [c]otton pigking strike and to force them into more misery and starvation. . . . We are holding you responsible for all this and are demanding justice for these two croppers!" As word of the violence spread, armed strikers organized their own "posses" and in one instance a group "met the vigilantes as they started to raid a striker's shack. When the gang saw the opposition was formidable, they ran, and since then the raids have not been so frequent." Lemon Johnson remembers a similar case occurring on the night of Merriweather's death in which an armed contingent of women from the Hope Hull local set out along Route 31 near Hickory Grove in search of "some of the mob to shoot at."²¹

The immediate victories were relatively significant, particularly in Tallapoosa and Lee counties. On several plantations union workers returned to the fields earning between seventy-five cents and one dollar per hundred pounds, in some cases with the right to gin and sell their own cotton. On at least one Montgomery County plantation, strikers won the full one dollar per hundred pound wage rate. In Lowndes County, however, where SCU organizers entered the strike suffused with confidence, the union emerged from the debacle quite shaken. Opposition was so overwhelming that by early September strikers were returning to work at the rate of forty cents per one hundred pounds.²² Reflecting on the loss of comrades and dear friends who gave their lives in the cotton pickers' strike, Clyde Johnson penned a lyric tribute entitled, "To Those Who Fell":

Look yonder, you who still believe
The rotten lies the landlords tell,
Look at the blood drenched cotton fields
Where your brothers fought and fell.

Listen to the landlord's trembling brag
Of shooting strikers in the back,
Of riding murder gangs in the dark of night,
Of beating wives and children in their shacks.

Our comrades challenged the landlord's greed,
Their hunger, misery and oppression.
They built the Union Strong,
They taught us a mighty lesson. . . .

SHAKE IN YOUR BOOTS, YOU LANDLORD DOGS!

The day of final reckoning is near.

The farming masses, white and black,

Will smash your rotting seat of power! . . .²³

Through the *Daily Worker* and liberal news publications, Johnson, along with Donald Henderson and Joe Gelders of the NCDPP, publicized the beatings, arrests, and murders that had occurred during the strike. Governor Bibb Graves received numerous telegrams, resolutions, postcards, and letters from all over the country protesting the shooting and arrests of SCU members and the murders of Joe Spinner Johnson, Ed Bracey, Jim Merriweather, and Smith Watkins.²⁴ Accompanied by a delegation of three union members who had been run out of Lowndes County—Annie Mae Merriweather, Wesley Smith, and Henry Roberts—Johnson traveled first to New York to raise funds and discuss the recent strike and then continued to Washington, D.C., where the group arranged a conference with President Roosevelt and filed formal protests with the AAA, the Rural Resettlement Administration, and the postmaster general. AAA administrator Chester Davis promised to conduct an investigation, but the administration's efforts did not lead to a single indictment.²⁵

Johnson returned from Washington weary and disappointed, his memory still stinging from the loss of his comrades. But in January 1936, he was given an emotional boost when his friend, former Atlanta ILD worker Leah Anne Agron, arrived in Birmingham to serve as his secretary. Sharing a tiny semibasement apartment in Tarrant City, Anne and Clyde were married on March 4. Despite the companionship, the constant harassment and work that went into organizing an underground union took its toll. A few months later a visitor walked into the tiny Johnson household and saw “a young Southerner, thirty perhaps, white and frail with dark rings under his eyes. He talked without heroics of the dangers and difficulties of his work. ... He and his wife had an odd calmness and sat very still as they talked.”²⁶

With Anne's help Johnson worked to reinvigorate the SCU, implementing substantive changes in the union's structure with the intention of transforming it from an underground, armed organization to an open and recognized trade union of agricultural laborers. After long discussions within the SCU executive board, it was decided that establishing an open national office was a necessary first step toward legitimizing the SCU as a bona fide trade union. The board first decided on Dadeville, but as increasing numbers of Louisiana farmers sought SCU leadership, Johnson began spending considerable time

away from Alabama to work with the new Louisiana state organizer, Party activist Gordon McIntire. With the assistance of black organizers J. B. Richard and Abraham Phillips, Louisiana quickly became a beehive of union activity. A sit-down strike led by Richard stopped the FSA from evicting tenants from one of its plantations in St. Landry Parish, and under the able leadership of nineteen-year-old Phillips, Point Coupee Parish quickly became an SCU stronghold. (Two decades later, Abraham Phillips became a prominent figure in the Louisiana Deacons for Defense and Justice, an armed contingent of black men who offered protection for civil rights activists.) The events in Louisiana convinced Johnson to establish headquarters in New Orleans, which eventually replaced Dadeville as the SCU's administrative center.²⁷

Johnson continued to pursue an alliance with the STFU as well, but his appeals now fell on deaf ears. The growing anti-Communist sentiments of Mitchell, J. R. Butler, and Howard Kester, partly sparked by a personal distrust these men had for Donald Henderson, whittled away any latent support for a merger between the two movements. Throughout the winter of 1935–36, STFU leaders privately opposed organizational unity but still kept up a facade of friendly relations with the SCU. They even invited Johnson to address the second annual convention in Little Rock, Arkansas, in January 1936. In a letter to Gardner “Pat” Jackson, chair of the National Committee on Rural Social Planning and an STFU supporter, Mitchell agreed that both organizations had “very much in common,” but the idea of a merger (which Jackson supported) was simply out of the question.²⁸

Although Johnson had not yet dismissed the idea of merging with the STFU, other prospects developed due to substantive changes in Communist farm policy. Just prior to the Seventh World Congress in 1935, Party theoreticians Lem Harris and Clarence Hathaway pushed for a united front with Milo Reno's Farm Holiday Association and, to a lesser extent, made similar overtures toward the NFU. While attending the Farmers’ National Relief Conference in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, in March 1935, Johnson found within the NFU a potential ally much more formidable than the Holiday—an observation that was later supported by several leading Communists. He felt the Party was losing its influence within the already declining Farm Holiday Association while progressive forces within the NFU seemed to be winning their battle to oust conservative E. E. Kennedy and other “Coughlinites” from leadership.²⁹

Returning south with a new perspective, Johnson developed a close working relationship with AFU secretary W. C. Irby, a popular Birmingham Socialist who received over two thousand votes in his

1936 bid for Congress. Irby's senatorial campaign led Johnson to northern Alabama, where many AFU locals were dominated largely by racist poor-white farmers who believed black sharecroppers and tenants in the black belt region were to blame for the depressed price of cotton. Johnson and other SCU leaders used the opportunity to build an opposition movement against archconservative AFU president R. H. Sartain and his supporters, many of whom had open affiliations with the Klan. With the help of Winston County Communists McKinley Gilbert and Walker Martin, Johnson addressed crowds of white farmers in Walker, Winston, and Greene counties, deflating white supremacists' slogans by illustrating that the current price of cotton, compounded by competition from black belt landlords, only brought their families fifty cents per day—a sum tantamount to that earned by black tenants and laborers. Johnson's speeches electrified the upcountry crowd, but other factors contributed to the AFU's radicalization. In the coal mining and textile producing region of northern Alabama, dozens of small farmers and their relatives had worked in the mines and mills and thus brought traditions of industrial unionism to the AFU at a moment when the labor movement was once again becoming a force to be reckoned with in Alabama politics. In the gulf counties, on the other hand, the AFU was growing even faster because rich, often absentee landowners were undercutting small farmers by buying huge tracts of land and establishing corporate-type plantations. As black wage workers were being transported to these huge plantations in Baldwin, Covington, and Escambia counties, AFU organizers made a concerted effort to bring these black laborers into the union as soon as they arrived. By mid-1936, radicals within the AFU had gained considerable support from the rank-and-file.³⁰

As the prospect of an alliance between the AFU, the SCU, and possibly the STFU came nearer to fruition, Johnson, Donald Henderson, and members of the SCU executive board anticipated problems caused by combining wage labor and small farmers into one general union. The growing ranks of landless farmers-turned-wage workers faced problems radically different from small farmers and tenants. The former, the Communist argued, should now be organized along traditional labor union lines while the latter should concentrate on creating cooperatives and obtaining land and government loans. Therefore, the proposed unity agreement stipulated that sharecroppers and tenants merge into the Farmers' Union while agricultural workers organize under the auspices of an AFL-affiliated National Agricultural Workers Union. Such a plan, of course, would have meant the end of the STFU and SCU as autonomous bodies.³¹

STFU leaders vehemently rejected the idea of merging and dividing

the two agricultural organizations, which Mitchell characterized as “craft unionism’ in the cotton fields.” As he explained to Donald Henderson, whom he now treated as his adversary, “We are concerned with the needs of our people and do not intend to dissipate our efforts in following new lines or old ones.” The stream of anti-SCU articles that now began to appear in the STFU's organ, the *Sharecroppers Voice*, added fuel to Johnson's own suspicions of Mitchell, Butler, and Kester. He not only resented the cold manner in which these men treated him at the STFU convention in January 1936 but was disappointed when several black STFU members, including the union's leading black organizer, E. B. McKinney, complained of racism and nepotism within the Arkansas-based organization. “I knew then,” Johnson recalled, “there wasn't going to be any organizational unity.”³²

The NFU's radical shift, the Farm Holiday Association's decline in the Midwest, and strained relations between Communists and STFU leaders convinced Johnson that the Party should further alter its current farm policy. After two days of meetings during the ninth CPUSA convention in 1936, Johnson argued convincingly before the Central Committee that the future of rural radicalism lay in the NFU. Having won the support of Earl Browder, James Ford, and Comintern officials, Johnson was asked to work on the Agrarian Commission to implement the new policy nationally, a task he accepted reluctantly. Although he was allowed to return south to tie up loose ends and begin merger negotiations between state organizers of the NFU and the SCU, Johnson spent much of his time organizing NFU locals in the Northeast and Midwest.³³

The Party's new policy was announced three weeks later during the SCU's first national convention held in New Orleans. The executive board strongly appealed for a united front with the AFU on a number of agricultural and civil rights issues and proposed the creation of joint committees to discuss the possibility of merging the two organizations. The merger proposal divided the Farmers' Union and touched off a power struggle between the conservative leadership and the radical caucus that had been simmering for some time. The radicals, backed by strong labor supporters from Winston and Walker counties, won in the end, the AFU enthusiastically endorsing the merger proposal at its state convention in October 1936. Incensed by this development, R. H. Sartain resigned as president, and a handful of his loyalists left the convention in disgust.³⁴

In addition to bringing a few thousand black tenants and small farmers into the hitherto all-white organization, the radicals pressed

the Farmers' Union even further to the left. A movement once dominated by staunch racists, the AFU now adopted a civil rights plank, ardently supported the newly created CIO, and accepted the SCU's slogan of "40 Acres and a Mule" as its own. It also developed marketing and purchasing cooperatives and sought to secure low-interest government loans, land grants, and federal assistance for purchasing materials. More importantly, the AFU promoted the Sharecrop Contract, a uniform agreement drafted by Johnson that was intended to clarify the terms of settlement between tenants and landlords. The contract required that all advances and wages be paid in cash, stated the tenant's right to sell his or her own crop, obliged landlords to furnish a written monthly statement of accounts, and listed the specific duties of both the tenant and the landlord with respect to crops and harvesting.³⁵

The AFU's radical shift and incorporation of its poor black constituency, however, was neither smooth nor swift. Critical of the AFU's willingness to accept wealthy landlords into its ranks, Johnson realized a few months later that union leadership did not "understand sharecropper problems and . . . they are not proposing anything to suit their conditions." In terms of day-to-day organizing in the black belt, the AFU contributed very little at first, especially in the way of financial support. Black SCU organizers lived literally from hand to mouth, as Saul Davis's moving request for funds in 1937 so vividly illustrates: "the workers is not able to support me. . . . please dont fail to send me some funds just is soon is you get some for i need it bad to get me some thing to eat. ... all the job i got is organization work and i like the job and do mean to struggle but got to have support to struggle." Moreover, the relatively high membership dues required by the AFU slowed the transfer of SCU locals considerably. Accustomed to paying a joining fee of only ten cents plus regular dues of five cents per month, the SCU rank-and-file was now asked to pay an initial fee of \$1.50 for each individual member and an annual fee of \$1.50, without which a local could not obtain a charter.³⁶

At first, the immediate problems created by the merger overshadowed the Communist issue. Besides, AFU organizers Walker Martin, McKinley Gilbert, Clyde Johnson, and several others concealed their Communist Party membership so as to avoid internal schisms. But by spring AFU state secretary G. S. Gravelee discovered Johnson's political affiliations and immediately raised the red scare. Claiming to have uncovered a Communist takeover in the making, Gravelee proposed expelling all union members suspected of being Reds, beginning with Clyde Johnson. Johnson, in turn, charged Gravelee with making false accusations and criticized him for dividing the union. Not only was Gravelee found guilty of the charges, but the

radical wing of the AFU ran a progressive slate of candidates and swept all of the executive board positions. Both Gilbert and Martin were elected to the executive board, along with a number of independent radicals sympathetic to the Party, including the union's new president, Walker County's Vester Burkett.³⁷

By the end of 1936, radicals had seized control of the NFU as well as the AFU. The new national leadership created a Southern Organizing Committee under the direction of Burkett, Johnson, and Communist Gordon McIntire, who now headed the Louisiana Farmers' Union. But before the campaign got off the ground, the union's most important link to the Alabama black belt, Clyde Johnson, was asked by Donald Henderson to remain in Washington, D.C., in order to lobby for the Wage Hour Act. Gordon McIntire also had to withdraw soon afterward when tuberculosis kept him from continuing his work.³⁸

The loss of Johnson, in particular, was a devastating blow to the AFU's work among rural blacks. In Tallapoosa County, once the heart of the SCU, black sharecroppers and tenants were growing distrustful of the Farmers' Union. Vester Burkett reported in 1938 that "the Farmers Union has been misrepresented in [Tallapoosa] County. [It] is going to take some hard work to make those people believe our program." Rather than correspond with local AFU leaders whom they did not know, sharecroppers and tenants continued to send their complaints and requests to the defunct SCU executive committee in New Orleans, which now presided over the Louisiana Farmers' Union.³⁹ Among the many complaints was the unsolved problem of antiunion violence. While the AFU grew considerably among white farmers in northern Alabama and in the gulf counties of Baldwin, Escambia, and Covington, it still could not mitigate repression in the black belt or in the eastern piedmont, where black tenants continued to face the same pattern of racist violence. In Dallas County, for example, black union organizer Butler Molette suffered a near-fatal beating when local authorities became aware of his activities by illegally opening his mail. And when a landlord in King's Landing, Alabama, beat union leader Phillip Ruddier to death with a hammer and assaulted Ruddier's wife, local authorities refused to prosecute him. Possibly because of distrust or the AFU's inability to reduce rural violence, or both, some black small holders and tenants turned to their old nemesis—the federal agricultural extension programs. SCU locals in Tallapoosa County protested on behalf of a black home demonstration agent who was refused entry to an eastern Alabama fair, and in both Tallapoosa and Elmore counties, union members reportedly dominated the segregated 4-H clubs.⁴⁰

The shift from tenancy to rural wage labor and the adoption of

mechanization constituted the most powerful barriers to the AFU's growth in the black belt. The Farmers' Union had not developed a strategy to halt evictions, and (with the exception of the Sharecrop Contract) its agricultural programs were still concentrated on the needs of small, independent farmers. Unlike the old SCU, it was not responsible for organizing wage labor, whose ranks had grown remarkably as a result of New Deal policies. Indeed, as the number of evicted tenants multiplied, the SCU in the black belt was becoming an organization largely comprised of wage labor, and therefore its burgeoning constituency was now the responsibility of the AFL. In accordance with the original merger plans formulated in 1936, SCU farm workers in Alabama joined the FLCFWU No. 20471 under the leadership of Walker Martin.⁴¹ When the CIO split from the AFL the following year, the Alabama locals of the FLCFWU followed suit and were soon absorbed by the newly created UCAPAWA, which was now led by Donald Henderson. The founding convention of UCAPAWA elected veteran organizer Hosea Hart secretary and white Communist Richard Linsley president of District 9, covering Alabama, southern Mississippi, and Louisiana. Faced with financial difficulties and limited support from the CIO, the organizing work of District 9 proceeded at a snail's pace. After starting out with twenty-eight full-time Southern organizers, by January 1938 the number had been reduced to two. Nevertheless, by December 1938 Hart and Linsley had established fourteen locals in Alabama and reported a total paid-up membership of 1,832.⁴²

The AFU supported UCAPAWA by formally agreeing to hire only union cotton pickers, but the agreement was little more than a symbolic gesture since union scale was nearly the same rate as the average wage in the black belt—about forty cents per hundred pounds. The Alabama locals were so weak, Linsley conceded, that any attempt to strike would have meant disaster for the fledgling union. UCAPAWA's only significant victory in the Alabama black belt was the reversal of one of the WPA's many discriminatory hiring practices. Before UCAPAWA's organizing campaign, sharecroppers, tenants, and resident farm hands could not apply for WPA jobs unless they secured their landlord's approval, which was almost always denied in order to ensure the landlord's own supply of cheap labor. Through the lobbying efforts of Linsley and Donald Henderson, however, national WPA officials in 1938 allowed union officers to sign the applications in lieu of the landlord.⁴³

Although UCAPAWA posed no serious threat to Alabama landlords, its organizers still experienced fierce repression from local authorities. In Tallapoosa County, where the apparition of armed resistance weighed heavily on the minds of white landlords, the local sheriff

utilized methods of intimidation to break the union. In 1938, Willie Joe Hart, the son of UCAPAWA secretary Hosea Hart, was jailed on a trumped-up charge of robbery and rape—a case so invidious that even an investigating committee sent by Governor Bibb Graves questioned the charges. It soon became apparent, however, that the police were really after his father. When Hosea Hart arrived at the police station to see about his son, Dadeville sheriff Cliff Corprew would only discuss the affairs of the union. He bragged of his role in the murder of several union members in the past and warned Hart that he intended to crush the union again, but this time “we’re not going to use pistols and rifles. We’re going to use machine guns and we’re going to mow every God damn one of you down.”⁴⁴

Willie Joe was subsequently released and Corprew probably realized he had no reason to bring in machine guns. When Hosea Hart was elected president of the district in 1940, the union had unraveled to such a degree that Tallapoosa was the only county with active locals. UCAPAWA’s program in Alabama was reduced to securing FSA loans for tenants and sharecroppers, struggling for a fixed rent in kind for tenants, and fighting for voting rights in the black belt. As UCAPAWA dwindled closer and closer to nonexistence, a handful of veteran SCU members held on to the old radical tradition with untiring optimism. Hence, Jesse L. Burton, secretary of Local 285 in Tallapoosa and veteran of the rural movement, could say in 1940, “UCAPAWA has brought a new day for us. A new light is shining and we are all waking up and will sleep no more.”⁴⁵ But many rural blacks followed another shining light of opportunity, leaving the countryside behind for opportunities in Birmingham, Montgomery, Mobile, and cities beyond the boundaries of Alabama or the Mason-Dixon line. In fact, Alabama lost 147,340 of its residents between 1935 and 1940, experiencing the highest net loss of population in the Southeast.⁴⁶ This trend, along with the mechanization of the cotton belt, would proceed at an even faster pace in the decade to come.

By 1940, the heyday of Communist organizing in the black belt was over. UCAPAWA soon ceased to exist in the state and the AFU continued to grow in northern Alabama and along the Gulf Coast. Although the Popular Front reinforced the Party’s efforts to solve the political and economic problems of the rural South (including its divide-by-tenure policy, which ultimately led to the SCU’s merger with the AFU and UCAPAWA), the destruction of the Communist-led rural movement cannot be attributed entirely to changes in the Party’s line or to some kind of conspiracy to liquidate the militant sharecroppers’ movement.⁴⁷ Neither the SCU, UCAPAWA, nor the AFU could have effectively reversed the massive changes that had disrupted the lives of sharecroppers and tenant farmers in the Alabama black belt.

Perhaps if UCAPAWA and the AFU had had more resources, or if the federal government had protected rural workers' right to organize as it had industrial and craft unions', the movement in the black belt might have had a different history.

Although the Communists could not sustain the mass movement in the black belt counties, the merger was not without its benefits. Within a two-year period Alabama Communists turned the AFU into a formidable force on the Left and an ardent proponent of labor and civil rights in the region. Moreover, the Party's growing prominence within the AFU notably altered the character of its rural support, from poor black sharecroppers and laborers to independent white farmers. Ironically, this demographic shift in the Party's rural base occurred just as it began to lose its urban black constituency.

Chapter Ten: The Democratic Front

An exercise in courage or militance for a worthy cause is, I believe, never wasted, even though its tangible result is impossible to measure. The tragedy of the Southern liberals and the Southern Communists is that a potential for great achievement was squandered.

—Robert F. Hall

Most, if not all, Southern liberals of the 1930s would have found these words scandalous—at best, wishful thinking; at worst, a vicious distortion of history. But Rob Hall's ruminations on the Democratic Front, based on firsthand experience and four decades of reflection, contain enough grains of truth to fill a silo. If democratizing the state of Alabama can be considered a “great achievement,” then Communists were indeed one of many groups on the threshold of ushering in a new era of reform. The CIO in Birmingham, for example, had become more than a federation of labor unions. It evolved into a unique force for social change, particularly for blacks—an evolution that can be traced in part to the vocal presence of Communist labor organizers. Communists spurred a handful of liberals into action as well; Joseph Gelders's beating and his persistent campaign against vigilante violence, in particular, rattled more than a few progressive Southern circles. By the close of the New Deal decade, Southern liberals had emerged from the closet as if in unison, assuming a stronger stance against poverty, racism, and civil liberties violations. And, of course, black middle-class organizations such as the NAACP, whose ranks now included reluctant radicals and black trade unionists, embraced a somewhat more activist civil rights agenda.

Yet during this same period, the Party had begun to lose organizational contact with its black rural supporters following the SCU's liquidation; its black urban membership shrank once the CIO began to take off; and the Party in general remained isolated and ostracized from Southern liberals and the black middle class. The latter was particularly damaging to the Popular Front. By late 1937, as Birmingham became the only sustained center of Party activity in the state, Communist leaders redoubled their efforts to attract progressive urban elites, especially white liberals. Its organizers were predominantly white native Southerners, its journal spoke directly to Southern liberals, and its loosely organized branches consciously

absorbed regional cultural influences. Even the language of class struggle was southernized. Party publications drew the battle lines between the “common people, Negro and white” and the “Bourbons” who represented post-Reconstruction reaction as well as “the Wall Street bankers and monopoly capitalism.” But after two trying years, Southern Communists failed to achieve their primary goal—to attain a legal, respectable standing in regional and local politics. Moreover, despite all the internal reforms, Party membership was less stable than it had ever been. To illustrate, although the Alabama Party reported only thirty-four dues-paying members in December 1937, in response to a friendly recruitment contest instigated by Texas Communists, Birmingham organizers managed to sign up 366 new members in January 1938 alone. Such a remarkable increase can be attributed to the period's relaxed standards for enlistment: one needed only to sign a card to be a Communist.¹

The Party's inability to overcome its insular existence was not just an Alabama problem; it was a national dilemma. By the close of 1937, national and international CP leaders had realized that the type of broad-based Popular Front led by Communists in Spain or France could not succeed in the U.S., at least not in the near future. It was decided, then, to refashion the U.S. Popular Front into a more realistic, politically accommodating policy. The Democratic Front, as it was called, retained the pro-Roosevelt rhetoric but departed from the Popular Front by accepting a furtive role in coalition politics. As one leading Party theorist explained, “We should support the progressive movement, not demanding the admittance of our Party, not making this a condition for our support of the democratic forces, but showing by our activity . . . that our Party is a constructive force entitled to entrance in the progressive movement, thereby paving the way for entrance at a future time.”²

Before 1938, Alabama had few liberal organizations or institutions in which Communists could work effectively. Aside from creating movements that would attract sympathetic political figures, Southern Communists believed a progressive agenda could be realized through the Democratic party. Exuding a sense of optimism prefiguring Jesse Jackson's presidential campaigns fifty years later, Southern Central Committee representative John Ballam best expressed the view that blacks, farmers, workers, and the struggling middle class could seize control of the Democratic party: “It is entirely within the field of practical politics for the workers, farmers and the city middle class—the common people of the South—to take possession of the machinery of the Democratic Party, in the South, and turn it into an agency for democracy and progress.”³

Alabama Party leaders took Ballam's words to heart, even to the point of focusing more attention on Democratic candidates than Communist candidates. In the 1938 primary Rob Hall challenged James Simpson for a Senate spot, and Joe Gelders, running as an independent Democrat, made a bid for state legislator. Though both were beaten handily, Communists exhibited no remorse and instead celebrated the victories of Congressman Luther Patrick and Senator Lister Hill. Hall even applauded the election of Joe Starnes over Tom Heflin as a victory for the New Deal slate. (Within a matter of months, Starnes would serve on the Dies Committee and accuse virtually every liberal, radical, or prolabor organization of Communist domination.) The election of Alabama New Dealers in the House and Senate, noted one optimistic Birmingham correspondent for the *Daily Worker*, was proof that Southerners clamored for a progressive agenda.⁴

No matter what Southern working people wanted, the Democratic Front offered Communists the *only* doorway into the world of Southern liberals, largely because the extent of their political isolation was more severe in the South compared with most of the U.S. The Communist label still frightened Birmingham's most progressive citizens, some of whom identified with the Party only in the privacy of voting booths. Joseph Gelders, the Communists' sole entree into Alabama's liberal circles, was well aware of the present impasse and moved swiftly to strengthen his influence among Southern New Deal Democrats. Realizing that a Southern chapter of the NCDPP, an organization widely considered a "Communist front," was more of a liability than an asset, Gelders decided late in 1937 to replace it with something more Southern and less threatening. Instead of creating another civil liberties organization from scratch, Gelders sought to merge the Birmingham NCDPP with an established but dying organization based in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, then called the Southern Committee for People's Rights.

Founded in Atlanta in 1933 by a small group of Left-liberal intellectuals drawn to the Herndon case, the Southern League for People's Rights (as it was originally called) was created as a non-Communist alternative to the ILD. Its founding members included journalist Bruce Crawford, a history graduate student named C. Vann Woodward, and Olive Stone, a sometime patron of the SCU and central figure among Montgomery's independent Marxists. Stone was the organization's driving force, serving as its secretary and editing its newsletter singlehandedly. When she moved to Chapel Hill in 1935 to pursue a Ph.D. in sociology, so went the organization, whose name by then had been changed from League to Committee. At its height in 1935, the SCPR had grown to fifteen hundred dues-paying members based mainly in Virginia and North Carolina, but its membership

began to dwindle after it fought efforts to dismiss University of North Carolina professor E. E. Erickson for dining with black Communist James Ford. By 1937 all that remained were a few dedicated liberals and a handful of Communists active at the university. When Gelders met with SCPR members late in 1937 and proposed merging the two organizations into a national committee for people's rights, few dissented. (Those opposed to the idea either personally disliked Gelders or believed—correctly so—that he was a Communist.) Less than a month after the negotiations had been finalized, Gelders opened the NCPR's national headquarters in Birmingham.⁵

Gelders staffed the NCPR with educated, Southern-born Communists whose political affiliations were not widely known. To direct the Birmingham office, he hired Laurent Frantz, an energetic young lawyer from Tennessee who would eventually become his son-in-law. Brought up in a reform-minded household—his father had actively promoted a single-tax colony in Tennessee—Frantz became interested in Marxism during the 1930s while studying at the University of Tennessee. Searching for a vehicle to practice his politics as he pursued a degree in law, Frantz joined the Socialist party but soon became disillusioned with the timidity of Socialist leaders, including Norman Thomas whom he considered a “pacifist intellectual.” Thus, when Communists proposed a united front with Southern Socialists late in 1934, Frantz not only responded to the call but switched his allegiance to the CP. Shortly thereafter, he received clearance to join the CP and was appointed assistant editor of the *Southern Worker* in January 1937, for which he wrote numerous articles under the pen name “Larry French.” After six months with the *Southern Worker*, he joined the staff of the NCDPP and worked on the campaign to free Bessemer Communist Bart Logan.⁶

One of the NCPR's first tasks was to reopen a four-year-old case involving Birmingham labor organizer John Catchings. Catchings had been convicted for allegedly dynamiting company property during the 1934 Republic Steel strike. The Party and the NCPR tried to build popular support for the case (Catchings was deemed “Birmingham's Tom Mooney”), but their efforts to free the Mine Mill organizer bore little fruit. Yet the campaign did produce “The Ballad of John Catchings,” a catchy little tune written by Joe and Esther Gelders, and in the process created a new folk hero for the Southern Left:

In '33 the Eagle came
And brought the NRA
John Catchings said: “Our time has come
We'll organize this very day.”

Those rich men's hearts are harder still
Than steel made in their mill
Republic would not be content
To obey the laws of government. . . .

Come gather round me Brothers all
Together let us shout
If we must take that jail house down
We're going to get John Catchings out.⁷

Musical contributions notwithstanding, on the surface the NCPR differed little from the old NCDPP; even its board of directors remained largely unchanged. But the organization's focus shifted sharply away from political prisoners to civil rights. In January 1938, Gelders and Birmingham NAACP secretary W. E. Shortridge jointly dispatched a circular letter endorsing the Wagner-Van Nuys antilynching bill that, if passed, would have allowed federal authorities to prosecute police officers or state officials who, through negligence or inaction, indirectly conspired in a lynching. Two months later, the NCPR joined the NAACP and three hundred black pastors to protest the appointment of an all-white staff to manage a newly created black housing project in Smithfield, an industrial suburb of Birmingham.⁸

The NCPR was not meant to replace the Communist Party. On the contrary, the CP continued to work openly, recruit members, and maintain a separate identity. Although the burden of work continued to fall on the shoulders of a few veterans, the Party's paid membership had increased steadily, reaching 850 by May. In preparation for the CPUSA's tenth national convention, Birmingham Communists hosted their first open regional conference, drawing eighty-five delegates from as far away as Oxford, Mississippi, to Atlanta, Georgia. Held in the Odd Fellows Hall a few days after May Day, the conference began and ended in a festive mood, complete with song, food, and brief tours of Jane Speed's bookstore. Leading the discussion with a report on the recent Alabama primaries, Rob Hall suggested that progressives approach Democratic politics through "people's legislative conferences" and other forms of lobbying rather than run independent candidates. Consequently, most delegates agreed that any successful political strategy required empowerment through voter registration. By the end of the conference full enfranchisement irrespective of race and the abolition of the poll tax were issues foremost on the Party's

agenda. As if to emphasize the revolutionary implications of winning the franchise, a group of Birmingham Communists inserted the new slogan into “Joshua Fit the Battle of Jericho,” closing the conference in jubilant chorus:

Black and white together we'll
win the vote,
win the vote,
win the vote,
Black and white together we'll
win the vote
Going to build our promised land.⁹

The Tenth National Convention, which opened in New York on May 26, not only affirmed the decisions of the Birmingham conference but placed particular emphasis on the role of the black middle class in building a Democratic South. The Alabama delegation, which included veterans Jane Speed, Rob Hall, Henry O. Mayfield, Hosea Hudson, and Hosea Hart, listened as black Party spokesman James Ford proclaimed the South the center of “Negro work.” The NNC, noted Ford and several other speakers, exemplified the trend toward a progressive alliance of black middle-class and religious organizations, trade unions, farmers’ organizations, student groups, and other mass movements. The Negro Commission asked Communists to join the church, the “main mass organization” in the black community, and encouraged black Party members to become even more active in the NAACP.¹⁰

The speeches and resolutions of the Tenth National Convention still placed great faith in a Southern liberal-labor alliance, but the focus on returning to the black community added another dimension to Party work. While black rank-and-file Communists had never left their communities, the Party had, until recently, subordinated black issue-oriented activity so as not to jeopardize relations with Southern liberals. But black Alabama Communists did not have an organization devoted primarily to black issues that they could call their own, especially after the ILD had been dismantled. Furthermore, neither the NNC nor the SNYC—a federation of black youth groups founded by young Communists in 1937—had established chapters in Alabama by mid-1938, and the NCPR, whose letterhead continued to list white radical intellectuals such as John Howard Lawson and Rockwell Kent, was still little more than a paper organization.

Influencing established black organizations was not a viable option either. Most black Communists who had joined the NAACP as

instructed were growing increasingly disenchanted with its leadership. Black Communists and former ILD organizers (who usually attended meetings dressed in overalls) were rarely taken seriously by their middle-class co-members. And when they did succeed in persuading branch officers to investigate incidents of police brutality, NAACP leaders proceeded timidly. One such case occurred in May 1938, after fifteen-year-old John Smith had been falsely convicted of raping an eight-year-old white girl. Immediately following the trial, as Smith was being escorted to jail, the girl's father H. E. Colburn, appeared in the corridor outside the courtroom and fatally shot the black youth while police passively looked on. When word of the killing reached Hosea Hudson, he asked the NAACP to pressure the district attorney into charging Colburn for murder. Under Hudson's leadership, a committee within the NAACP raised money and retained black Birmingham attorney Arthur Shores, but the charges against Colburn were dismissed nonetheless. As with several other local cases, NAACP leaders opted not to pursue the matter further. Consequently, many individual Communists left the NAACP disappointed: "The NAACP didn't change much, not much. They didn't do anything. They still didn't want to rock the boat, make they good friends mad. The leadership was still trying to make deals."¹¹

By late spring 1938, it became apparent that neither the NAACP nor the NCPR would be the vehicle for establishing the Democratic Front in Birmingham's black community. Joe Gelders had realized this months before both the regional and national conventions. As early as February, Gelders proposed a new organization that would focus all of its energies on what local Communists had agreed was the linchpin of the Democratic Front in the South—the right to vote. Rob Hall strongly concurred and both men called upon seasoned radical Hosea Hudson to organize such a broad-based movement in Birmingham. Within a matter of days, two black ministers and several local black Communists, including Henry O. May-field, Hazel Stanley, Cornelia Foreman, Mack Coad, and Jimmie Hooper, met in the Negro Masonic Temple and founded the Right to Vote Club.¹²

The right to vote without financial requirements and irrespective of race was by no means new to the Communists' program, but never before had the Party launched a campaign that had as its primary goal the enfranchisement of black and poor white voters. Even during the Popular Front, when the Party shifted to electoral politics, black organizers were either asked to distribute literature in support of Democratic candidates or leaflets explaining progressive legislation,

but no effort was made before 1938 to systematically challenge the Board of Registrars. Indeed, before the Tenth National Convention one Southern Communist leader not only questioned the importance of winning the vote for blacks but argued that most blacks in Southern cities already exercised the franchise.¹³

The Right to Vote Club prepared black adults for the rigors of voter registration by making procedural and legal information easily accessible to the community. Laurent Frantz taught classes on the state and federal constitutions, and club leaders held workshops on voter registration procedures. In these free community workshops participants were made aware of the various legal methods used by the state to limit the franchise. First, a two-year residency was required for participation in state elections, a one-year residency for county elections. Second, the applicant had to be able to read and write any passage of the Constitution, providing the applicant had been working most of the preceding twelve months, but if the applicant owned property worth at least \$300, the literacy requirement could be waived. Finally, the applicant was required to pay back poll taxes.¹⁴

In addition to these requirements, African-Americans faced an added assortment of legal and extralegal hurdles. Most county boards required that black applicants have two white male sponsors vouch for them in a court of law before processing their application. More commonly, blacks were turned away for failing to answer irrelevant questions, such as who served on the president's cabinet or how many drops of water there were in the ocean. The intimidation one confronted at the registrar was overwhelming, even for a seasoned Communist like Hosea Hudson: "You'd be surprised how people felt. I know how I felt, and that's the way I know how them people felt. You just get nervous. . . . Telling people to come out to meetings and to register to vote is one thing. But going down to the horse's mouth to register to vote is another."¹⁵

Although the Right to Vote Club opened its doors to blacks and whites of all classes, it was predominantly a black working-class organization. A few prominent black businessmen and professionals in Birmingham in 1938 exercised, and jealously guarded, the franchise. Indeed, for some the vote was more of a status symbol than a democratic right. While collecting data for Gunnar Myrdal's study of black life during the late 1930s, Ralph Bunche found that in Birmingham "it is not unusual for 'upper class' Negroes—business and professional men—to take the attitude that the great mass of Negroes, being uneducated and illiterate, are not yet ready to exercise the franchise." And one of his research assistants listened to a black

Birmingham miner describe, with less erudition but greater poignancy, the role “big niggers” play in keeping the vote out of the hands of poor blacks: “They go down and register and tell the white folks that they can control the rest of the niggers in town. They get a light handout and that is all there is to it. Now, they have been trying to get all the niggers in the mines to vote. If they do it will be a different story.”¹⁶

Thus Communist leaders of the Right to Vote Club were not surprised when some of their most vocal opponents turned out to be black middle-class voters. Leading the charge was the Birmingham Negro Democratic Council led by black conservative M. D. L. White. Formed in 1933 by blacks who had split from the Alabama Federation of Civic Leagues, the council had the backing of several white politicians who had intended to control the black vote by allowing select individuals to register. In a private meeting with Hudson, White invited the Right to Vote Club to join the council if Hudson reduced the club's membership to a select few. White told him, “We only going to qualify those that you all will recommend, send down or bring down. Your friends, we'll qualify them. But don't send everybody down. Don't bring common nigras, and don't bring over fifty a year.”¹⁷

Scoffing at White's offer, club members continued holding seminars, disseminating pamphlets, and discussing voting rights with ordinary citizens in the black community. After several months of preparation, Hudson and several other club members approached the Jefferson County Board of Registrars in the spring of 1939 and attempted to register. After all of the applicants were turned down, the group retained black attorney Arthur D. Shores to file a petition on their behalf with the federal circuit court. Choosing the strongest applications in the group, Shores petitioned on behalf of Hudson and five black school teachers (the latter risking immediate dismissal from the Board of Education for their involvement in the suit), but the presiding judge refused to issue a writ of mandamus requiring the Board of Registrars to explain why the six petitioners were turned down. Nevertheless, the Jefferson County Board of Registrars subsequently decided to register the petitioners anyway so as to avoid a legal precedent.¹⁸

As a result of publicity surrounding the case, the Right to Vote Club began to attract several prominent blacks in 1939, including Birmingham *World* editor Emory O. Jackson and UMWA organizer Hartford Knight. More significantly, the Board of Registrars' practice of registering petitioners in order to avoid a court battle eventually led to an increase in black registered voters. In 1938, Jefferson County

had only 712 registered black voters; two years later this figure had ballooned to approximately 3,000. But registration was only half the battle since most blacks still could not pay the required back poll tax, which could total thirty-six dollars or two months' wages for many unskilled or domestic workers. In the end the Right to Vote Club fell short of becoming a mass organization, and without the complete support of the NAACP and organized labor, it lacked the strength needed to bring about a full-scale suffrage and anti-poll-tax campaign. Weakened by internal squabbles and petty jealousies, the club finally collapsed under its own weight in 1940.¹⁹

In an address praising President Roosevelt's 1938 report of the NEC on economic conditions in the South, Earl Browder contended that the "participation of an awakening Southern intellectual group" was essential to solving the region's pressing problems. Browder's words set the tone for the Democratic Front: the hope for a New South lay, not exclusively with the working class or even the black masses, but with the emerging group of Southern liberals. By 1938 this interpretation was not entirely empty rhetoric, for New Dealers and civil liberties advocates had begun to rise from Southern intellectual circles, perhaps more vocal and more determined than ever. The work of the SPC, a think tank composed of prominent intellectuals, had come into its own during the 1930s. Established mainly to tackle the South's economic dilemmas, the SPC encouraged the NEC's study of the region's political economy. The activity of the Chapel Hill-based SCPR not only attracted several eminent names but belied the notion that Southern liberals habitually backed away from direct confrontation. Of course, the region's liberal activist/intellectuals were still miles to the right of Southern Communists, but the gap was narrowing ever-so-slightly in the late 1930s.²⁰

The idea for a conference of Southern liberals and labor leaders had been brewing in Joe Gelders's mind for some time, even before the appearance of the NEC report. Early in 1938, following extended preliminary discussions with state CP secretary Rob Hall, Gelders asked Lucy Randolph Mason, the CIO's Southern regional public relations representative, to help organize a civil liberties conference in the South. Meanwhile, Gelders discussed his plans with Eleanor Roosevelt, whom he had met through two International Ladies' Garment Workers' Union organizers from Tupelo, Mississippi, and in June he was granted a private hearing by Franklin Roosevelt. The president liked the idea but asked Gelders to broaden the scope of the conference to include other matters, especially voting rights issues such as the poll tax and other exclusionary practices.

Returning to Birmingham, Gelders organized two meetings in July

to discuss the region's political and economic problems. At the second meeting on July 21, the group drafted a statement of purpose, proposed a broad conference on the economic conditions in the South, and invited the SPC and other liberal groups who had been working independently toward the same goal. On September 6, enthused by the recent release of the NEC report on the South, one hundred representatives from seven Southern states returned to Birmingham to discuss the report, finalize plans for a conference in November, and give themselves a name. This unique gathering of Southern intellectuals, activists, and labor leaders called themselves the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (SCHW).²¹

The SCHW's debut was a rousing success. Over twelve hundred delegates filled Birmingham's municipal auditorium on November 20 for the four-day meeting. Some of the South's most distinguished liberals assumed permanent offices within the SCHW, including UNC president Frank Graham, Herman C. Nixon, Clark Foreman, and Judge Louise O. Charlton. Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black was also in attendance to receive the conference's first Thomas Jefferson Award for distinguished service. In the course of four full days of debates, speeches, and panel discussions, delegates addressed, among other things, issues raised by the NEC report, passed resolutions opposing regional wage and freight differentials, endorsed the FSA, and strongly supported Senator Robert La Follette's investigations into civil liberties violations. The conference even advocated appropriating federal funds for housing, slum clearance, and parks and recreation—a demand that had been on the Birmingham Communist Party's agenda for several years. When a resolution on Scottsboro declared in no uncertain terms that the case had been an outgrowth of social conditions in the South, it must have brought a smile to the faces of Communists in attendance.²²

Conference organizers tried to translate the SCHW's message of justice and equality into action by holding nonsegregated meetings. The first day of mixed sessions alarmed quite a few delegates, but the meetings were held without incident. When proceedings resumed the next day, city commissioner Eugene “Bull” Connor and a small contingent of police officers showed up to enforce Birmingham's segregation ordinance. Rather than defy the order and use their collective strength and eminence to challenge one facet of Jim Crow, delegates complied, choosing instead to pass a resolution condemning the city's segregation laws. As the more radically inclined reluctantly abided by the law, a disgusted Eleanor Roosevelt defiantly placed her chair in the aisle dividing black from white.²³

In public the Party praised the SCHW. Paul Crouch, then editor of the *New South*, described the four-day affair as “the beginning of a road to a better, happier, more prosperous South—a NEW SOUTH.” But before their own close-knit circles, Southern Communists offered less adulation and more critical commentary. Though otherwise enthusiastic about the SCHW's future, Rob Hall felt the delegates offered too few effective solutions for dealing with rural poverty and, in line with the Democratic Front, expressed displeasure with the conference's focus on labor to the detriment of the Southern middle class. Furthermore, Hall admonished the white delegates for their paternalism toward blacks, pointing out that Southern progressives who offered to “do for the Negro” failed to see “the Negro people as a force which could contribute greatly, in its own right, to the solution of these joint problems.” Such an attitude was not only inexcusable, Hall argued, but the SCHW's success depended upon the complete inclusion of blacks as active participants and leaders. In a review of James Ford's *The Negro and the Democratic Front* published in the *New South*, Hall used Ford's life to show Southern liberals that blacks have more to offer than entertainment and muscle: “As a native Southerner, reared in circumstances very similar to your own, I know with what doubts you approach this question. ... It is difficult for you, perhaps, to conceive of learning the solution of a great historic problem from the words of a former Negro steel worker of Pratt City.”²⁴

The Communists' strongest criticisms of the conference were reserved for closed meetings and were never made public. Most prominent on their private list of grievances was the delegates' unwillingness to challenge Birmingham's segregation laws. Hours after the SCHW's first run-in with police, local Communists held a special meeting to discuss the day's events. Nearly everyone agreed that the circumstances offered a unique opportunity to mount a successful challenge to segregation. With utmost caution, Gelders set out to persuade influential delegates to defy the laws, but few were willing to even entertain the idea, let alone join the fight.²⁵

As could be expected, the SCHW faced charges of Communist domination from the outset. Its detractors probably would have cried Communism no matter when the conference came into being, but such charges carried considerable weight late in 1938, the year Congressman Martin Dies launched the special committee on un-American activities. It marked the beginning of an era sometimes called the “little Red Scare.” That the SCHW had been created in the midst of premature McCarthyism was bad timing at best, for practically all opponents appropriated anti-Communist rhetoric to articulate a variety of grievances. During the Dies Committee hearings, for example, committee member J. Parnell Thomas, a New

Jersey Democrat, linked a number of alleged radical government officials to the SCHW in an effort to prove that “the New Deal is working along hand in glove with the Communist Party.” His co-committee members also claimed that the CPUSA funneled cash to the SCHW by way of Rob Hall and Joe Gelders.²⁶



*Eugene “Bull” Connor, Birmingham city commissioner, late 1930s
(courtesy Birmingham Public Library)*

Anti-New Dealers were not the only ones playing political football with the SCHW's reputation. Some of the strongest accusations came from inside the Southern Conference, from the other end of the ideological spectrum. STFU activists Howard Kester and H. L. Mitchell made sweeping claims that Communists controlled the conference, and Socialist Frank McAllister called for the expulsion of CP members from the SCHW ranks. “We were trying to do things that were absolutely fundamental,” SCHW activist Virginia Durr recalled, “right on the lowest level of political and economic democracy. And these socialists and Trotskyites did nothing in the world but red-bait.”²⁷

Most Southern opponents, however, were much more concerned with black than red. Unlike the Socialists, racist critics cared little for naming names or proving direct political connections, choosing instead to base their accusations of Communist subterfuge solely on an individual's stand vis-à-vis the color line. Indeed, most letters of protest from Birmingham residents judged the SCHW on the basis of a single event: its resolution condemning the city's segregation ordinance. Shortly after the conference closed, city commissioner Jimmie Jones received dozens of letters praising him and "Bull" Connor for their principled stand against the Reds as well as numerous requests for a thorough inquiry into Communist activity. Though Jones was himself a conference participant, he nonetheless requested a Dies Committee investigation of the SCHW.²⁸

Alabama industrialists launched the most sustained attack against the Southern Conference. "I am one of the greatest believers of White Supremacy," explained Birmingham mining magnate Charles DeBardleben in a letter to SCHW chairman Frank Graham, and as such he would never tolerate an organization whose members "mingle and associate with negroes." Like most other Birmingham capitalists engaged in a bitter struggle with the CIO, DeBardleben had hoped Southern liberals would come to their senses and abandon the Southern Conference once and for all. Their most influential and sophisticated mouthpiece was *Alabama: The News Magazine of the Deep South*, a slick, weekly publication sponsored by the Association of Southern Industries. Ostensibly a popular magazine of conservative opinion, *Alabama* was founded as a foil against the CIO and Southern New Dealers, the SCHW representing the worst of both tendencies. "Joe Gelders' 'Southern Conference' on how to abolish white supremacy in the South" was just a Communist front, the editors announced, replete with "carpetbaggers" and "self-appointed social uplifters of the left wing . . . with social equality as their No. 1 objective."²⁹

Conservative opposition to the SCHW, combined with the activities of the Dies Committee, facilitated a resurgence of white supremacist organizations in Alabama. Patterned largely after the White Legion, most of these organizations were preoccupied with Communism and promoted their cause in highly charged patriotic language. Early in 1939 a group of Montgomery businessmen and attorneys formed the Alabama Council of Accepted Americans to fight Communism and other foreign ideologies. Though white supremacy was one of its cardinal principles, the council gave assurances that "no fight would be made on the Negroes." At about the same time, the AWDC, founded by Mabel Jones West in 1928, was revitalized by the new political climate. Describing the Southern Conference as an "affront"

to white womanhood and an insidious attempt “to destroy White Supremacy,” West and the AWDC organized an “America for Americans” counterrally in Birmingham shortly after the SCHW’s first meeting.³⁰

While upholding the Communists’ right to participate, Frank Graham defended the SCHW from charges of Red control, identifying only six Party members among the gathering of twelve hundred. But Graham’s findings eased few minds: several prominent figures, including Alabama politicians Lister Hill, John Bankhead, and Luther Patrick, bolted the Southern Conference for fear of being associated with Communists. Those who remained in the organization, while trying to be good civil libertarians, grew increasingly hostile to known Communists active in the Southern Conference. When Rob Hall offered to purchase two hundred copies of the SCHW proceedings early in 1939, Judge Louise Charlton refused at first to fill the order, arguing that Communists should not have access to SCHW material. But because the proceedings were available to the general public, Judge Charlton could not justifiably turn down Hall’s request.³¹

The conservative political climate was especially damaging to Alabama’s nascent industrial labor movement. By mid-1939 CIO leaders found themselves in a position not unlike that of the SCHW, caught in the bramble of accusations planted by Martin Dies and friends. The Dies investigation marked the beginning of a full-scale assault on organized labor: between 1939 and 1941 alone, nearly fifty antiunion bills were introduced into Congress. Leading the charge in Birmingham was Alabama congressman and Dies Committee member Joe Starnes, who had made sweeping claims that Communists controlled the state CIO industrial council. Outraged by Starnes’s indictment, *Alabama (CIO) News Digest* editor E. T. O’Connell dismissed the charges as “a smokescreen behind which to fight honest, God-fearing people who have cast their lot with labor organizations.” He agreed with Starnes, however, that Communists have no place in the labor movement and pointed to several clauses and resolutions denying membership to CP members. If Communists were active in CIO unions, O’Connell declared, the blame must be placed on management, not labor: “There is nothing in the code of employers, so far as we know, denying employment to Communists, such as there is in the constitutions of CIO affiliates. So, if there are employers here or elsewhere who know of Communist members of the CIO, it is their duty first to discharge them as employees. . . . If they have any proof that will hold water, they can be assured the CIO affiliates will boot out the Communists.”³²

Most Birmingham labor leaders joined O’Connell in supporting the

anti-Communist tenets of the Dies Committee, so long as the CIO did not fall victim to scapegoating. This posture was not new; the same argument had been used in opposition to the state antisedition bill in 1935. State CIO president William Mitch, no doubt cognizant of Communist organizers in Mine Mill and SWOC, claimed repeatedly that the CIO was free of CP members. In defense of his own union, the UMWA, Mitch proudly pointed to article 14, section 2 of its 1938 constitution, excluding Communist Party, KKK, and IWW members. Birmingham CIO director Noel R. Beddow, who had hired known Communists as SWOC organizers, was especially vehement in his response to the Dies Committee's allegations. The Communists, he explained in an "open letter" to Joe Starnes, were "well educated, smooth talkers, well fed and well clothed who have been sent into a district where the field is fertile for the growth and development of the poisonous seeds of their un-American, un-democratic theories." The CIO had no people like that, Beddow claimed, only poor, semiliterate black and white workers incapable of grasping the principles of Bolshevism. In a letter to the *Birmingham Post*, Beddow not only denied Communist influence in both the CIO and the SCHW but went to great extremes to prove labor's undying support for Southern traditions: "Certainly labor is not in favor of Communism. . . . The only equality labor is seeking in the South is the equality of wages and working conditions. The Negro worker certainly is not seeking any social [e]quality."³³

The little Red Scare had taken its toll by the middle of 1939, forcing liberals and labor into temporary retreat and ruining the Party's hopes for a Southern Democratic Front. As CIO and SCHW leaders geared up for their own internal investigations and expulsions, an unexpected event in Europe hastened their actions. In August 1939, the Soviet Union signed a nonaggression pact with fascist Germany that cleared the way for the Nazi invasion of Poland and simultaneously enabled Russia to invade Finland. After an initial period of disbelief, two confusing months passed before the Comintern announced a substantive change in the Party line. The old antifascist slogans were dropped as the Central Committee launched a new campaign to keep America out of the "imperialist war." The era of the Democratic Front came to an inauspicious end.³⁴

The widespread disillusionment within national Communist circles following the Nazi-Soviet Pact is a familiar story and need not be retold here. In Alabama, however, the events after August 1939 followed a somewhat unique pattern. The pact just did not have much effect on a cadre primarily black and poor. Most Birmingham Communists were more concerned with CIO work than foreign policy issues, and in the midst of growing sentiment to expel radicals from

the labor movement, Party members simply had more pressing problems to contend with. Even the black middle class refrained from criticizing local Communists for their support of the pact. On the other hand, the Nazi-Soviet Pact was acid to the already deteriorating relations between Communists and liberals, especially within the SCHW, where heightened suspicions gave way to bitter conflicts. For his rather mild defense of the Soviet Union's actions, Joe Gelders was accused of being a Communist, prompting several SCHW members to call for his immediate expulsion. Gelders denied the allegations, claiming only a perfunctory knowledge of Marxism and a soft spot in his heart for any defender of civil liberties. So adamant were his denials that during the 1940 campaign for city commission, Gelders threatened to sue candidate W. B. Houseal for calling him a Communist. Lying about his Party affiliation was undoubtedly a painful experience for a man who had desired to be an open Communist from the moment he joined. But Gelders's vilification within the Southern Conference—the movement he had helped bring into existence—was far more devastating, particularly since the attacks had more to do with foreign policy than with the SCHW's immediate goals.³⁵

Despite efforts to keep the controversy a private matter, conflict over Soviet actions threatened to split the SCHW in half during its second meeting in Chattanooga, Tennessee, in 1940. For a brief but significant moment, the conference's theme of “Democracy in the South” took a backseat to events in Russia and northern Europe. When a group of interventionists led by journalist William T. Couch proposed a resolution condemning the Soviet Union's invasion of Finland, Gelders and a number of other Communists and liberal isolationists opposed it, setting in motion an unwanted debate on the floor. But Gelders's protestations were to no avail; the resolution was adopted. Though the resolution made no impact on American or European politics and the SCHW as a whole still opposed U.S. intervention, the controversy resulted in a few more resignations, increased suspicions, and an unavoidable political split within the Southern Conference.³⁶

From a national and international perspective, the Nazi-Soviet Pact and Russia's invasion of Finland represented the Democratic Front's final epitaph. U.S. Communists abandoned most of their hard-earned liberal alliances, prepared new literature assailing Wall Street warmongers, and made plans for the “re-Bolshevization” of the Party. In Alabama, on the other hand, there were no liberal alliances to drop since a potent, racist strain of anti-Communism precluded any open relations between Southern liberals and Communists. In Alabama Joe Gelders was the Democratic Front, and he went no further than

defending Soviet foreign policy. He did not give up on the Southern Conference, despite the animosity and name calling, nor did he or his comrades abandon the Party's Southern program of expanding the franchise, fighting for black civil rights, and supporting the CIO. The SCHW did not give up on Gelders either; in 1939 he was elected executive secretary of its civil rights committee, through which he spearheaded a mass anti-poll-tax campaign. While developing the anti-poll-tax bill (H.R. 7534), arranging for its introduction by Congressman Lee Geyer, and building a case to challenge the tax's constitutionality, Gelders proceeded with unusual dedication, sometimes without pay. (In 1941 the SCHW owed Gelders \$1,470 in back salary!) Moreover, throughout the 1940s Communists held several important posts in the Alabama chapter of the SCHW—their presence not so much influencing Alabama liberal opinion as constituting a critical section of it.³⁷

The potential for great achievement *was* squandered, as Rob Hall had said, but the squandering had taken place long before Comintern directives invaded local politics. Although the South had made tremendous progress toward reducing outright antilabor and antiradical repression, the power of anti-Communism in its uniquely Southern form—and the residual racism accompanying it—created an invisible barrier between many like-minded individuals. When the Nazi-Soviet Pact entered Southern liberal politics, the somewhat awkward defense thrown up by Joe Gelders and friends just made the barrier more formidable. By 1940 the Central Committee announced a change. Hoping to recapture the Third Period spirit without completely falling back into sectarianism, Communist leaders looked to “re-Bolshevize” the Party from top to bottom. A return to the old radicalism, anchored by a strong antiwar platform, was intended to rebuild the Party's tottering base of support. Alabama CP leadership tried to follow suit: in 1940 Rob Hall criticized the SCHW for not adopting an antiwar stance, placed labor at the center of the radical movement once again, and credited the black industrial proletariat for the “heightened militancy” of Southern civil rights struggles.³⁸

But the experiment in Popular Front politics did not die so easily. Beginning about 1939–40, a new wave of radicals entered the Alabama CP, resumed the coalition-style politics of their predecessors, and constructed an interracial movement of young people who shared the subversive belief that freedom, equality, and opportunity are the inherent rights of all Americans, irrespective of race, class, or sex.

Part III: Back to the Trenches, 1939–1941

Threatened and attacked, fingerprinted and mugged, jailed and held incommunicado—that is the story of three YOUNG SOUTHERNERS and potentially of all those Southerners who are struggling against mob rule and lynch law in Dixie.

—*Marge Gelders, circular letter, August 23, 1940*

In this momentous period of world history, there is a binding solidarity existing between the youth of the South and all democracy loving people. We have always been opposed to Fascism in whatever form it occurs. Hitlerism and its Aryan theories of racial superiority gives comfort and courage to KKK-ism everywhere. . . .

—*Esther Cooper, quoted in Daily Worker, September 23, 1941*

Chapter Eleven: The March of Southern Youth!

Side by side we'll wage our fight
Equality for black and white
On the way, everyday, making
way for Socialism. . . .

We'll build a Stronger Party
Hooray! Hooray!
In Dixieland we'll take our stand
To fight like hell for our demands
Hooray! Hooray!
To make a People's Dixie

—“Dixie,” *Birmingham CP song*, 1938

While the Nazi-Soviet Pact crushed most U.S. Communists' hopes for a legitimate place in American politics, their comrades in Alabama emerged with renewed strength. The Democratic Front, as defined by the Central Committee, never had a chance in a region where liberals were themselves isolated, ridiculed, and red-baited, and the dream of building a left-wing bloc in the Democratic Party was pure folly in the solid South. The change wedded local leaders to working people once again; they now sought to reclaim the traditions upon which the Birmingham CP had been built almost a decade earlier. And they sought to create new ones. By discarding Popular Front liberalism for something more radical, the Party attracted a new cadre of activists who did more than just populate its dwindling ranks. This eclectic gathering of independent radicals, rebellious youth, Christian Socialists, black nationalists, and budding feminists shaped Birmingham Party politics and fashioned a new culture of opposition derived from militant interracialism, socialist values, and democratic principles.

Of course, on paper at least, Birmingham Party leaders toed the new line handed down by the Central Committee. Turning against their New Deal allies, they resurrected plans for a Farmer-Labor party, placed their own candidates on the 1940 ballot, and advocated a policy of international peace and domestic reform.¹ But Joe Gelders, Rob Hall, and the younger cadre developed their own agenda for

Birmingham's reconstituted radical movement. One of their first tasks was to replace the liberal newsmagazine *New South* with something more appropriate. Late in 1939 Joe Gelders launched a new radical tabloid that appealed directly to Southern industrial workers and farmers. Whereas Communists across the country turned out convoluted theoretical tracts on Leninism, the crisis of capitalism, and the objective reasons for opposing war, Gelders wanted to reach a broad, working-class readership without mentioning Communism. After securing financial assistance from left-wing philanthropist Dan Gillmor, Gelders assembled an able editorial staff consisting of George Londa, a Communist from Newark, New Jersey, who had worked for the Birmingham *Age-Herald* and the Chattanooga *News*; Quentin P. Gore, a former labor organizer and experienced newspaperman who had worked for the Montgomery *Advertiser*, Birmingham *Age-Herald*, and Chattanooga *News*; and Alabama-born Sam Hall, a former editor for the Anniston *Star* and one of the Party's recent recruits. Staffed by three left-leaning veteran journalists and a handful of rank-and-file Communists responsible for circulation, the first issue of the Birmingham *Southern News Almanac* appeared on January 25, 1940.²

The *Southern News Almanac* never revealed its relationship to the CP, devoting most of its columns to the Southern labor movement, antiwar activity, civil rights issues, and police brutality in the Birmingham area. In the spirit of the old *Southern Worker* it revived workers' correspondence, though its editors were not nearly as selective or sectarian with what they chose to print. One early issue even published a lengthy letter by a Georgia woman praising the Klan for protecting women in her community from domestic violence. Moreover, Gelders's new tabloid sharply contravened national Party dictates and carried religious columns promoting a Southern brand of the social gospel. Two Communist ministers, the Reverend Fred E. Maxey from Leeds, Alabama, and Georgia-born preacher Don West, contributed regular columns to the *Southern News Almanac* that explained war, racism, poverty, and capitalism in biblical terms. Calling his column "The Awakening Church," Don West hoped other religious institutions would follow his lead and take a more activist stance. "[The Church] must become a fearless prophetic voice with the audacity to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord—the building of the Kingdom of Heaven on this earth, and now!" Fred Maxey's "Pulpit in Print" frequently echoed West's charges that the church had failed to live up to its historic role as advocate for the poor. Southern ministers, Maxey wrote, "have held out the promises of golden streets and large mansions in heaven as a reward for poverty and wretchedness down here." Thus through the pages of the *Southern News Almanac*, Maxey and West attempted to fuse Christianity and

Marxism. In keeping with the writings and teachings of theologians Reinhold Niebuhr, Claude Williams, and several other proponents of the social gospel, Maxey and West regarded Jesus' mission as inherently radical. The teachings of Christ constituted a revolutionary text for social change, a blueprint for transforming earth into heaven. But to realize God's will required action: "Oppressors, who draw their sustenance from the masses have had to be pulled down, and as the autocrats have come tumbling down the people rose."³

While the radical implications of their sermons undoubtedly frightened many people, their attempts to articulate the Party's antiwar position was sometimes incongruous with the overall message, leaving many readers suspicious. In one of West's columns he condemned Britain for volunteering to send troops to Finland but never once mentioned the USSR's presence there. Maxey went so far as to reject any aid to the Finnish people: "We need not try to soothe our conscience by shedding tears over the starving in Europe. Neither can we make amends to man or God by sending money to feed the hungry over there, as worthy as this cause may be." Although many readers agreed with the basic contention that war in Europe would not solve America's social ills, such statements doubtlessly undermined Maxey's and West's credibility.⁴

Though still hindered by Soviet foreign policy and besieged by the Dies Committee, the Birmingham CP made considerable progress in the year following the Nazi-Soviet Pact. In the 1940 presidential election, for example, Earl Browder and James Ford polled an impressive 509 votes in Alabama (Socialist Norman Thomas received only 100 votes). The Party's resurgence, however, cannot really be measured numerically; rather, the broader Communist-led radical movement experienced a sudden, definite surge of energy. Through two notable organizations, the LYS and SNYC, an idealistic group of black and white, largely well educated young people injected new life into the radical movement. Indeed, SNYC and the LYS, neither of which maintained an open relationship with the Party, literally became the radical movement in Birmingham.

The LYS was an outgrowth of the Council of Young Southerners, an auxiliary of the SCHW founded in December 1938. Under the leadership of Birmingham attorney Helen Fuller and Arkansas activist Howard Lee, the council was conceived as an interracial, regionwide organization that would develop its own youth-oriented, New Deal agenda under the SCHW's tutelage. Its original program—a far cry from its future radicalism—proposed a federal youth administration combining the National Youth Administration and the CCC, vocational programs for urban and rural youth, and long-term, low-interest

federal loans for young Southern farmers.⁵

Only two Communists, Howard Lee of Arkansas and Ed Strong of Virginia (also the only black) served on the five-member executive board, and both kept their political affiliations to themselves. Nevertheless, the growing anti-Communist sentiment within the SCHW spilled into CYS affairs. In June 1939, Frank Graham made several queries into the Communists' role in the CYS, to which Howard Lee vehemently denied any CP connection whatsoever. William McKee, himself very much opposed to Communism, seconded Lee's response, calling the CYS "New Deal through and through." Though several prominent SCHW members expressed reservations about Lee's politics, the CYS generally remained impervious to the red-baiting that had threatened its parent organization, in part because it maintained a separate, autonomous existence. The Southern Conference acted as sponsor on paper, but the CYS raised its own funds and opened its own national office in Nashville during the summer of 1939. Free to set its own agenda without SCHW interference, the CYS drifted further to the left. By the end of the year Howard Lee resigned his post as executive secretary to devote more time to the SCHW, leaving the reins to Malcolm Cotton Dobbs, a Communist minister who had joined the staff in early August. Nicknamed "Tex" for his native state, the twenty-three-year-old activist had already earned a Bachelor of Divinity degree from St. Lawrence University, studied at Union Theological Seminary, and worked for the Student Christian Movement. About six months after Dobbs's appointment, CYS headquarters were moved from Nashville to Birmingham, the organization's name was changed from Council to League of Young Southerners, and it affiliated with the American Youth Congress.⁶



League of Young Southerners. Top row, left to right: unidentified, Mike

Ross, unidentified, James Dombrowski; bottom row, left to right: unidentified, Junius Scales, Malcolm "Tex" Dobbs, James E. Jackson, (courtesy Marge Frantz)

These changes reflect a deliberate shift in strategy and an infusion of new leadership, both of which point to the growing influence of the CP. Without the broad support needed to turn the council into a regionwide, interracial umbrella movement, the Young Southerners diverged from its parent organization and developed a more activist-oriented, community-based program. Once in Birmingham, the LYS directed most of its energies to anti-poll-tax organizing, police brutality cases, civil liberties violations, and educational and cultural work. The league's Birmingham membership, for the most part newly recruited Southern white Communists, shared much in common with Southern liberals but believed direct action should take precedence over mere discussion. One of the league's early local leaders, an energetic Birmingham woman who became Malcolm Dobbs's bride in 1940, epitomized this new spirit of activism. A Communist since her days at Phillips High School where she had been recruited by Marge Gelders, Pauline Dobbs continued her studies at Birmingham-Southern College while she worked for the LYS and, much later, for the Alabama Committee for Human Welfare. Together, "Tex" and "Polly" Dobbs maintained high visibility as civil rights and labor activists throughout the 1940s. Another young white couple active in LYS affairs were Ordway and Mary Southard. The New York-born Ordway, the elder of the two, concerned himself mainly with Party work while Mary, a native of Alabama, devoted most of her time to youth activities in 1940–41, working for the LYS and serving as regional YCL director. Sidney Rittenberg, who was only nineteen when he took over Malcolm Dobbs's position as LYS executive secretary in 1941, joined the Communist Party as a student at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill. The offspring of a prominent Southern Jewish family, Rittenberg was an intellectual at heart, having become a Marxist "by way of an academic course in Hegel's philosophy."⁷

Not surprisingly, a leading light among young Birmingham radicals was a product of the Gelders household. Born in 1922, Marge Gelders was already a veteran of the Left by the time the LYS moved to Birmingham in 1940; she joined the YCL in 1935 during her family's brief residence in New York. A brilliant student at Phillips High School in Birmingham, she graduated in 1938 and, at sixteen, continued her intellectual and political endeavors at Radcliffe College in Massachusetts. During her two-year stay she worked with the League of Women Voters in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and organized a delegation of Southern youth to attend the American Youth Congress

in Wisconsin. Returning to Birmingham in 1940, she became active in the LYS and the SCHW and in 1941 married another young Communist, civil rights lawyer Laurent Frantz.⁸

The league settled into Birmingham with high hopes, most of which were never realized. A radical movement raised in an increasingly repressive atmosphere, it never developed into a mass movement, drawing at most a couple dozen dedicated members. Nor did it attract the kind of interracial following it had hoped for at its founding meeting in 1938. Instead, the LYS accepted a supportive role, acting in concert with the Party and with SNYC—another radical youth organization that, just a few months earlier, had established headquarters in Birmingham.

SNYC's origins can be traced back to the National Negro Congress in 1936. Its primary progenitors were NNC national youth chairman Ed Strong and James Ashford, a noted black YCL organizer in Harlem. While the Arkansas-born Ashford persuaded the youth council to focus on the South, much of the early planning can be credited to Strong. A Communist since the early 1930s, Strong was the son of a Baptist minister born in Texarkana, Texas, and raised in Flint, Michigan. He attended the YMCA College in Chicago and became a youth leader at Mount Olivet Baptist Church—intending all along to follow in his father's footsteps. But by the time he became active in the left-wing First International Negro Youth Conference in Chicago in 1933, he had drifted toward the Communist Party and abandoned his quest to become a man of the cloth. Instead, he pursued a graduate degree in political science at Howard University and devoted his life to activism.⁹

Strong's plans for a Southern conference of black youth, scheduled to take place in November 1936, were postponed when he had to leave for Geneva that summer to attend the World Youth Congress. The task of organizing such a conference was then passed to James E. Jackson, Jr., a young pharmacy student pursuing an M.S. degree at Howard University. A native of Richmond, Virginia, born in 1914 “into a cultured family in comfortable circumstances,” Jackson had become a rebel at a very young age. He fought racism and segregation in the Boy Scouts, joined the Communist Party at sixteen, and as a student organized Virginia Union University's first Marxist club. With the help of Detroit labor organizer Christopher Columbus Alston, a dynamic black auto worker barely in his twenties, Jackson spent the summer planning the first Southern Negro Youth Congress. Meanwhile, Henry Winston, a twenty-five-year-old black Mississippi-

born Communist who had been in the YCL since 1930, was sent on a Southern speaking tour in order to publicize the coming conference. By the time Winston headed South, SNYC organizers had decided to hold the inaugural, two-day conference in Richmond, Virginia, on February 13–14, 1937, to coincide with Frederick Douglass's birthday.¹⁰

Over five hundred delegates representing thirteen states and an array of social, political, civic, religious, and fraternal organizations attended the Richmond meeting. Following two days of speeches and forums covering a range of issues, including voting rights, recreation, education, health, and fascism, the gathering elected to become a permanent organization and chose Richmond as its national headquarters. Though several Communists were elected to key positions in SNYC, its advisory committee consisted of distinguished individuals in the fields of politics and education, including Mary McLeod Bethune, Charlotte Hawkins Brown, sociologist Charles Johnson, and Atlanta University president Rufus Clement. The delegates who volunteered to remain in Richmond to set up an office did not sit idle. Under the leadership of James Jackson and Chris Alston, SNYC activists organized some five thousand tobacco workers under the auspices of the Tobacco Stemmers and Laborers Industrial Union. A successful SNYC-led sit-down strike in Richmond's British American Tobacco Company resulted in wage increases ranging from 20 to 33 percent.¹¹

SNYC's second annual conference in Chattanooga the following year attracted nearly four hundred delegates, including international representatives from Ethiopia, India, and China. Once again the forum topics varied, ranging from marriage and home life to the CIO organizing drive, but the basic theme was the right to citizenship. Under the slogan "Freedom, Equality, Opportunity," the conference focused on disfranchisement, promised to wage an anti-poll-tax campaign, and supported interracial unity under the banner of the Democratic Front. Before the Chattanooga meeting came to a close, delegates Hosea Hudson, Henry O. Mayfield, and Birmingham *World* managing editor H. D. Coke persuaded the conferees to meet in Birmingham the following year.¹²

The decision to hold SNYC's 1939 conference in the Magic City could not have been more timely. By the time SNYC executive secretary Ed Strong arrived in Birmingham to set up temporary headquarters, the Right to Vote Club was well underway, the CIO in Jefferson County had initiated voter registration drives, and the SCHW had just held its inaugural meeting. Strong not only participated in the SCHW conference but helped launch the CYS in December 1938. He

was especially buoyed by the local support he received for SNYC's third annual conference, scheduled for the end of April. Organized labor, traditional black leadership, youth, and adults alike greeted SNYC with open arms and offered crucial support. Several prominent black leaders served on the arrangements committee, including NAACP secretary Charles McPherson, businessman A. G. Gaston, Bishop B. G. Shaw, Oscar Adams, and conservative editor Robert Durr. The only Communist other than Strong to appear on the committee's letterhead was veteran Birmingham activist Cornelia Foreman.¹³

The Birmingham meeting was the largest to date, attracting 650 delegates from across the region, most of whom represented the host state. Delegations from local high schools and Alabama's black colleges were joined by rural and working-class youth, labor organizers, teachers, social workers, and sympathetic whites. The common themes of citizenship and equal opportunity were repeated throughout the proceedings, but special emphasis was placed on black culture. The first day began with four Birmingham choral groups performing "songs of the Negro people, the traditional spirituals, and worksongs, and arrangements of contemporary Negro composers." The works of gifted black visual artists were displayed in a SNYC-sponsored art exhibit; the Dillard University Players Guild performed three one-act plays by black playwright Randolph Edmonds; and to top it all off, philosopher and literary critic Alain Locke addressed the gathering on the importance of cultural heritage.¹⁴

Local delegates and leaders came away from the conference feeling as Ed Strong did when he first arrived in Birmingham—that the city was ripe for a revolution of black youth. In the eyes of most Youth Congress leaders, Birmingham was indeed, as one delegate put it, "the cradle of a reviving faith in the Negro people's destiny in the South." And given the dearth of existing black youth organizations in Alabama, SNYC must have been looked upon as a savior. Between 1938 and 1939, the only active NAACP youth councils could be found at Talladega College and in Mobile, and these chapters were surprisingly small. Before SNYC, many young blacks turned to Communist-led organizations such as the Right to Vote Club or the Workers Alliance. As sociologist Charles S. Johnson noted in his study of segregation patterns in Birmingham in the late 1930s, young blacks seemed prone "to utilize the willingness of the radical white groups who are there to lend aid in the fight for equal rights."¹⁵

Thus few were surprised when SNYC officers moved their headquarters to Birmingham, a decision reinforced by newly elected

national leaders. Delegates elected Herman Long, a native of Birmingham and teacher at Miles Memorial College, to serve as chairman; Ed Strong, who now made Birmingham his permanent residence, was reelected executive secretary; and Thelma Dale was the top choice for vice-chairperson. Although Dale was then studying sociology at Howard University, her uncle was one of Alabama's leading educators, Tuskegee Institute president Frederick D. Patterson.¹⁶

The Youth Congress set up its Birmingham office only a few months before the LYS arrived from Nashville. That both SNYC and the LYS established headquarters in Birmingham almost simultaneously was not entirely coincidence; Southern Party leaders strongly encouraged the move. In the aftermath of the Nazi-Soviet Pact and the collapse of the Democratic Front, Birmingham seemed to be the Party's last hope in the South, at least from the purview of 1940. It was the one Southern city that had everything: a hardy industrial labor movement, a potential black civil rights movement, and a small but increasingly radical intelligentsia. At the heart of all three potential sources of opposition were young people. Most SNYC and LYS activists shared a common democratic socialist vision, espoused a militant interracialism, and pledged full support for the CIO organizing campaign and a civil rights agenda. And those who quietly maintained Communist Party membership shared even deeper political and cultural ties to the international movement to create a new world.

Yet there were very stark differences between SNYC and LYS activists, especially in regard to their respective backgrounds and motives. White radicals, drawn primarily from privileged surroundings, joined the LYS or the Party in order to challenge their own racial and class status, to buck the system that promoted and maintained inequality. Most were idealists and iconoclasts in the purest sense of the word. Others, such as Marge Gelders, could be characterized as an early crop of "red diaper babies." In this category one might include Gerald Harris, Jr., the son of radical organizer and AFU president Gerald Harris, Sr. At seventeen the younger Harris was a leader in the LYS, became active in the American Youth Congress, and consequently joined the CP.¹⁷

On the other hand, the denial of opportunities and the paradox of racism in a democratic society motivated most SNYC activists. Black urban youth, in particular, entered the late 1930s with rising expectations fueled by the New Deal's rhetoric of equal opportunity and a slightly better chance to pursue higher education. Some Birmingham blacks optimistically turned to New Deal agencies such as the National Youth Administration, which claimed to offer training

programs, recreational facilities, and an array of opportunities for struggling young people. But few blacks even saw the inside of a youth administration office, and those who did participate were placed in menial or domestic labor programs. In 1937, 147 of 200 women in Alabama's youth administration domestic training program were black, while only 38 black women of 401 participants were enrolled in the clerical program. It is probably not a coincidence, then, that a sharp rise in black juvenile delinquency in Birmingham occurred in the mid- to late 1930s.¹⁸

Once SNYC opened a Birmingham office, a number of talented individuals, many of whom were well-educated young women, were quick to volunteer their skills. Ethel Lee Goodman, who eventually became the director of SNYC's rural committees, had been somewhat of a restless spirit since her high school days in East Birmingham. As early as 1937 she complained to national NAACP youth director Juanita Jackson that "the work of the Jr NAACP here is not what it should be," and Goodman expressed plans to revitalize Birmingham's defunct youth councils. "I have contacted a number of leading negro boys and girls and they are very anxious to help promote the growth of the organization here in the south." Nothing came of her plan, however, and so she turned to other activities, such as organizing WPA workers in the Workers Alliance. Less than six months later Goodman not only joined the CP but was a delegate to the Party Builders' Congress in New York in February 1938.¹⁹

Sallye Davis, a recent graduate of Miles Memorial College, was another vital link in SNYC's chain of black female leaders. Born and raised in Talladega County, Alabama, Davis moved to Birmingham in 1931 to continue her high school education, and in 1935 she won a scholarship to Miles College. She first found out about SNYC during Ed Strong's visit to campus and soon became close friends with SNYC chairman Herman Long and his wife Henrietta. Although Davis's teaching obligations limited her participation in SNYC during its first year in Birmingham, by the early 1940s she emerged as one of its key local leaders. Though she apparently never joined her many friends in the Communist Party, her daughter Angela Davis was destined to become perhaps the most celebrated African-American in CPUSA history and a veritable icon in black communities across the nation.²⁰



Ink drawing of Ethel Lee Goodman, part of a series depicting delegates to the Party Builders' Congress of March 1938 (Daily Worker)

SNYC's most important and visible female leaders in 1940 were newcomers to Alabama. Ed Strong's wife and comrade, Augusta Jackson, was born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, a generation removed from her parents' home state of Georgia. A precocious student, Jackson graduated from Brooklyn College with honors and later earned an M.A. degree from Atlanta University. Shortly after joining her husband in Birmingham some time in 1939, Jackson plunged into organizational work, contributing articles to the *Crisis*, actively promoting congress events, eventually editing SNYC's newspaper, and all the while teaching at Miles College.²¹

Esther Cooper joined the staff during the summer of 1940 to serve as office director and administrative secretary. Born in Arlington, Virginia, in 1917, Cooper was the daughter of a school teacher (also a leading voice in the local NAACP) and a U.S. Army officer with an impeccable record of military service. Educated in Washington, D.C., public schools, she enrolled in Oberlin College in 1934. By her sophomore year, Cooper had been drawn to several political organizations, including the Fellowship of Reconciliation and the American Students Union. She attended a few YCL gatherings where she spent most of her time engaged in debate, defending pacifism over the Party's current brand of antifascist politics. But the Spanish Civil War, to a large degree, changed all that: soon she became an avid supporter of the republic's battle against Franco.

Graduating in 1938, Cooper continued her studies at Fisk—at the behest of distinguished social scientist Charles S. Johnson—to pursue an M.A. degree in sociology. There she met a small coterie of Communist professors, mostly white, who brought her into their inner circle. One in particular invited her into “a little ‘Anne Frank’-type room at the back of his house where he lifted up the curtains and it was just full of books by Marx, Lenin, [and] the Communist International.” As her relationship with radical faculty grew, so did her interest in Communism: before leaving Fisk she joined the Communist Party. Meanwhile, she remained active in student politics, joining the Student Christian Association and attending SNYC's historic Birmingham conference in 1939. By the time Cooper graduated in 1940, she was highly regarded for her scholarly as well as political endeavors. Her master's thesis on domestic workers and unions captured the attention of renowned sociologist Robert Park, who offered her a scholarship to pursue a Ph.D. under his direction at the University of Chicago. At the same time, Ed Strong and James Jackson asked her to run the new Birmingham office. Choosing the latter, Cooper moved to Birmingham in July 1940 and bid farewell to a promising academic career. Her reasons for accepting SNYC's offer were primarily political, but there were personal considerations as well. James Jackson, whom she had met at Fisk while he was conducting research for Gunnar Myrdal's study of African-Americans, had moved to Birmingham as SNYC's educational director. Although both Jackson and Cooper were romantically involved with other people when they met, the two corresponded, fell in love, and consequently married in 1941—six days after May Day.²²

In the rural areas, even more than in Birmingham itself, women seemed to be at the center of SNYC activities. When Ethel Lee Goodman assumed leadership of SNYC's Alabama Rural Committees in December 1940, she tapped a tradition of women's collective organization that had once thrived in the SCU. It was no coincidence, therefore, that the Tallapoosa County Youth Council was the largest rural committee and that its local leader, Dadeville resident Mary Jane Gray, was related to SCU pioneers Ralph, Tommy, and Eula Gray. By April 1941, Goodman had organized five rural councils in Tallapoosa and Elmore counties, many of which were led by young women. Indeed, rural committee members devoted most of their time to quilting and soliciting used books and magazines to stock local schools, the latter reflecting black women's concern for improving the lives of their children—a concern that had driven many women to join the SCU. The quilting project, conceived as a fund raiser, was also an age-old social activity crucial to building and maintaining women's community networks.²³

Because women figured prominently in SNYC as well as the LYS, their concerns and grievances carried over into the Birmingham CP. This younger female cadre were far more sensitive to sexism and, for the first time in the Birmingham Party's history, raised the "Woman Question" directly and unambiguously. Men were charged with male chauvinism for making blatantly sexist remarks, pursuing extramarital affairs ("womanizing" as it was called), denying women responsible positions, and most commonly, for not involving their wives in political work. Some women occasionally used circumstances not directly related to women's oppression to subtly raise issue with sexism in American (specifically Southern) society. In an appeal for funds following the arrest of local activists, Marge Gelders added, "I, too, was arrested but 'Southern chivalry' caused our local Gestapo to set me free while the others were thrown in jail cells." Partly in response to women's grievances, black and white women in the early 1940s held many more leadership positions, not just in the Party but in SNYC and the LYS as well. Nonetheless, the younger radicals' antisexist campaign was in many ways far in advance of its time and thus faced indomitable opposition from male activists who strongly believed political struggle was a man's job. Moreover, many working-class wives of activists looked upon female Communists and SNYC leaders with suspicion, particularly since most were not only well educated and articulate but young and very attractive. "When I would call their house," Esther Cooper Jackson remembers, "I would always invite both the husband and wife to a meeting. But many of the women had been kept so backward that they [thought] I must have been in it because I was interested in their husbands." Indeed, some outsiders, such as NAACP leader W. C. Patton, believed the Party "hired some good looking girls to work for them" as part of a larger plot to charm black male leaders into supporting their agenda. He adds, "They could sell you if you listened to their talk."²⁴

While equally vocal in their opposition to intra-Party sexism, black women in leadership positions directed most of their attention to racism, as did almost everyone else in the movement, mainly because the problems of police brutality, disfranchisement, and discrimination were so overwhelming. It should also be noted, however, that some black Communist couples, particularly Ed Strong and Augusta Jackson, and Esther Cooper and James Jackson, strove to eradicate sexism in their personal and political lives. Both Ed and James pushed their wives into the realm of public speaking and away from mimeograph machines, and at home they shared the duties of housework and child rearing. And to the chagrin of their more traditional comrades, Esther Cooper and Augusta Jackson retained their maiden names for several years after marriage. The men's

behavior, Esther Cooper Jackson remembers, was largely motivated by Marxism. “They actually thought [that] to be a good Communist you struggled on the woman question.”²⁵

Together, SNYC and the LYS enveloped Birmingham Party life with a unique “movement culture” that shared much in common with the civil rights movement two decades later. Despite racial, class, and cultural differences, leaders of both organizations consciously strove to live by their own vision of a multiracial, socialist society. Certainly segregation continued to be a fact of life, but young Communists managed to develop “close, comradely working relations between blacks and whites.” “We were hemmed in and hung up by the segregation system,” recalls Marge Frantz, “but we did have social relations on an individual level, and they were very close.” Indeed, both SNYC and LYS members risked arrest and possible beatings in order to meet together in a social setting. A popular spot was a small coffee shop located in the Negro Masonic Temple. And while social ostracism was usually the price young whites paid, the loss of friends was, to a large degree, compensated for by the movement's subculture and the interracial community of activists with whom they interacted and, in many cases, whom they loved dearly.²⁶

The presence of SNYC's educated, highly respected cadre of black leaders sensitized the Birmingham CP to incidents of intra-Party racism that many Southern-born black Communists generally ignored. “There were complaints from time to time,” Laurent Frantz recalls of this period. “Sometimes there was the feeling that we weren't doing as much as we could [for blacks].” This new sensitivity even led to a few trial-like sessions at which some white Communists admitted to “unconscious white chauvinism.” Nevertheless, even the more militant black Party leaders showed greater tolerance for intra-Party racism in the South than they would have in the North. “Our standards on that score were lower because there was more realism,” James Jackson recalls. “[Blacks] understood what the traffic would bear within reason. They didn't expect miracles from white Communists.”²⁷

Blacks involved in SNYC—Communists and non-Communists alike—articulated through culture a complex radical consciousness that simultaneously advocated interracial unity and black nationalism. SNYC's founders not only recognized a unique black cultural heritage but set upon the task of promoting “a conscious art, rooted in the lives, the struggles, and aspirations of the vast numbers of our race.” In addition to sponsoring art exhibits and musical performances by black artists, congress leaders placed special emphasis on theater as a means of reaching large numbers of people with their message. Pernell Collins, SNYC's director of culture, and playwright Thomas Richardson

helped found the People's Theater in Richmond and New Orleans. Although a full-scale People's Theater never developed in Birmingham, SNYC activists there directed and performed several plays and skits dealing with the poll tax, democracy, strike breaking, black history, and Southern black working-class life in general. Since most Birmingham theaters forbade black productions or were too expensive to rent, most performances were held in churches, community centers, and local mining camps. The Youth Congress also brought theater to rural Alabama in the form of the Caravan Puppeteers, a traveling puppet show launched during the summer of 1940 that performed short but potent skits dealing with suffrage, racial equality, citizenship, and the sharecropping system.²⁸

Like the *Liberator* and *Southern Worker* before it, SNYC's short-lived monthly, *Cavalcade: The March of Southern Negro Youth* became a forum for creative expression. Founded early in 1941 under the editorship of Augusta Jackson, *Cavalcade* offered local and national news, political commentary, cultural criticism, and poetry. Because *Cavalcade* published a wide range of authors, from accomplished poets to young activists who dabbled in verse, much of the work is uneven in quality. Nonetheless, these poems provide a small window into the complex consciousness of SNYC members, reflecting not only the writers' thoughts on democracy and racism but the editors' choice of political messages.²⁹

The central theme of all political verse in *Cavalcade* was America's inability to live up to its democratic creed. A poem titled "God Bless the Negro Race" by Esther Mae Howard and James Bolden, two working-class youth living in the small mining town of Belle Ellen, Alabama, could not have been more explicit in its claim that democracy was a God-given right. Composed of simple, somewhat clichéd phrases, Howard and Bolden's poem could have been used as SNYC's credo:

God Bless the Negro Race
With all the honor due
Give us a just opportunity
To share in this democratic liberty.

God Bless the Negro race
With the right to vote.
"All men are created equal."
All men have a load to tote.

God Bless the Negro Race
Like other races we know.
We are tired of being barred from
freedom
Help us fight our foe!³⁰

Waring Cuney was perhaps SNYC's most prolific and popular literary figure, though hardly the neophyte one might associate with a youth-oriented movement. An established poet and musician, a graduate of Lincoln University, and an original Caravan Puppeteer, Cuney was entering his forties when *Cavalcade* was launched. Like his friend and fellow Lincoln man Langston Hughes, Cuney displayed a deep affection for the blues. His "Organize Blues" spoke directly to the life and toils of Birmingham's industrial labor force:

Tell you one thing
Will make you mad . . .
When the company store
Says your credit's bad.

Going to the meeting
Hear what I say . . .
Poor folks got to
Organize the blues away.³¹

Many of Cuney's *Cavalcade* pieces carried a strong antiwar message. "Uncle Sam Says," another Hughes-style blues, suggests the futility of fighting a war for democracy when the U.S. had yet to live up to its ideals—a common theme in black antiwar resistance since the American Revolution. Nonetheless, the nationalist implications of this poem are balanced by an allusion to interracial unity and class struggle:

Aeroplanes fly across
Land and sea,
Everybody flies them
But a black man like me.

Uncle Sam says,
Your place is on the ground.

When I fly my aeroplanes
Don't want no Negroes around. . . .

Uncle Sam says
Two camps for black and white.
But when trouble starts
We'll all be in the same big fight. . . .³²

Likewise, the work of New Orleans poet and SNYC activist Eugene B. Williams embodied both blues form and antiwar content. In “Drafted Blues,” Williams speaks through the voice of a black woman who has lost her fiancé to military conscription. While the poem's central figure “got to be a soldier, fight for / democracy,” the irony is that he could not make a decent enough living in his own democratic country to marry the woman he left behind.³³

Like Cuney, Eugene Williams appears to have taken his inspiration from Langston Hughes. His “New Songs from Dixie,” published in 1941, is reminiscent of Hughes's “A New Song,” published nearly a decade earlier:

Deep in the heart of Dixie,
New songs are in the air—
Not songs of supplication,
Not songs of dark despair,
But songs of We Want Justice
For white and black alike,
With melodies unending
Until that note we strike.³⁴

Certainly Hughes's early focus on class struggle and social revolution is absent from “New Songs from Dixie,” but the single theme that runs through both Williams's and Cuney's work is the unfulfilled promise of democracy. Moreover, lines such as “For white and black alike” stand in sharp contrast to the various stanza's that articulate growing racial militancy among black youth during the war. The subtext of Williams's racial politics is much clearer in his moving poem titled “The Christening,” in which he implies that racism constitutes the ultimate contradiction in American democracy. The words are those of a black minister who, while christening a black boy named “John Charles Tenth Man Thomas,” reveals to the child the harsh realities of life in the U.S.:

When you are old enough to walk
and talk,
Be sure you “stay in your own
back yard,”
For your nut-brown skin and
kinky hair
Are poison in the sights of Nine
Tenth Men.
And when you've grown old
enough to go to school
To learn to read and write and
understand
The doctrines of democracy,
Let not your desires for the select
fruits of the tree

Of liberty lead you into places
where
Those fruits are divided among
the Nine Tenths
People of this glorious land.
Amen!³⁵

In order to change the world, SNYC activists maintained, the struggle must be interracial in composition and militant in character—a striking dictum for a black organization in the late 1930s and early 1940s. *Cavalcade* editor Augusta Jackson made this point crystal clear in a long poem entitled “The People to Lincoln, Douglass”:

Up from the people,
Poor white and black, slave alike,
Horny-handed from the frontier
and farm . . .

Fred Douglass, in Maryland, you
endured the cut of the slavers’
lash ‘till blood flowed
But Abe, you felt it, too, up there
in Illinois. . . .

Ironically, Jackson's allusions to the similarities between poor whites and blacks, as well as to the forms of oppression unique to the black experience, harken back to the CP in the early 1930s. The entire poem subtly suggests a future, interracial, working-class movement that would incorporate some form of black self-determination. In other words, Jackson reiterates an old political vision (which in both cases ignores women) without using the Party's characteristic convoluted language:

We are free now—all the people
of America—black and white
and Indians
Free from slavery—yes,
Free from land, too,
And bread, and power to rule ourselves,
Free from happiness and leisure.

Abe Lincoln clench your fists once
more, straighten your back,
and take the hand of Fred
Douglass, the ex-slave,

And turn to the people—
We are ready, again, Abe Lincoln.
We, the people will drive out the
slavemaster. . . .³⁶

The literary expressions of SNYC activists and supporters, therefore, advocated a politics of inclusion *and* self-determination—a vision of interracial democracy combined with black militancy, economic fairness without explicit references to socialism, and an uncompromising antisegregationist discourse inextricably linked to a celebration of the African-American heritage. Yet these cultural forms and the unique social life that developed within SNYC and the LYS did not develop in a vacuum. On the contrary, the evolution of a youth-based, radical movement culture was shaped by their political experiences in the Magic City. The period between 1940 and 1941 might even be seen as a preface to the explosive civil rights battles that erupted in the streets of Birmingham twenty-two years later.

Youth Congress officers had barely settled into their new

headquarters at the Negro Masonic Temple when, in April 1940, they had to rush off to New Orleans for the Fourth All-Southern Negro Youth Conference. The New Orleans meeting fell short of capturing the feeling of unity and nonsectarianism characteristic of earlier gatherings, mainly because the issue of Communist participation became a central subject of debate for the first time in SNYC's history. As with the SCHW and other contemporary liberal movements, the Dies Committee and the Nazi-Soviet Pact began to take their toll on the Youth Congress's internal political life. SNYC's adult advisors, in particular, tried to pass resolutions restricting Communist participation, and some even called for the expulsion of suspected Party members. Although most rank-and-file delegates defended the right of all youth, regardless of their political affiliations, to join SNYC, the ensuing debate and rising anti-Communist sentiment did lead to a small exodus of members and advisors.³⁷

More significantly, the New Orleans conference adopted a regional strategy for a mass voter registration and anti-poll-tax drive. Although the right to vote had been one of its slogans since 1937, SNYC's program of action outlined that spring set members in motion, especially in Birmingham where the new political landscape was ideal for such a campaign. The LYS had just arrived and was anxious to begin its own anti-poll-tax work; the Alabama CIO had stepped up voter registration activities; and the CP's longstanding foe, the NAACP, had launched a community-based suffrage campaign in Birmingham earlier that year. The NAACP's support for an antilynching bill, decent housing, integration in the armed forces, and higher wages for black workers, as well as the right to vote, made its program uncomfortably similar to SNYC's and the Communist Party's. Indeed, the Birmingham NAACP had developed such a radical reputation that it began to lose some of its black middle-class membership. Early in 1940, national NAACP representative Frederick Morrow reported that the Birmingham branch had "disintegrated pretty badly," to the point where it had to rebuild again "cold from scratch." "It does take courage," Morrow explained to Walter White, "even here in Birmingham, and a great deal more in the little towns in the country. With the anti-lynching bill hot at the moment, a man who parades around town with a button on his lapel has got guts."³⁸

Following the decisions of the New Orleans meeting, SNYC set out that summer to build a mass suffrage campaign, essentially taking up where the (now defunct) Right to Vote Club had left off. In June 1940, SNYC launched its campaign with a mass Right to Vote rally at Birmingham's Sixth Avenue Baptist Church. The audience of several hundred, most of whom were black, listened to speeches by local NAACP leaders, CIO organizers, educators, and SNYC activists

suggesting ways to proceed. The congress's basic demands included the elimination of the poll tax, of white primaries, and of various literacy requirements, and complete protection from physical violence and other forms of intimidation blacks had to endure at polling booths.³⁹

Over the next few weeks a series of smaller community meetings were held in Bessemer, Ensley, and Pratt City to mobilize support for SNYC and publicize the Geyer anti-poll-tax bill. Ed Strong and James Jackson resumed the Right to Vote Club's educational function by instituting workshops designed to prepare black residents for the vagaries of registration. Workshop participants learned precisely what their rights were with respect to the poll tax, property qualifications, and voter registration for veterans. Congress organizers also tried to reach workers in the TCI-owned mines, but company police posed a formidable barrier. At the Hamilton Slope mine, for example, police arrested James Jackson and Esther Cooper for distributing anti-poll-tax literature to miners.⁴⁰

To highlight the summer campaign, the SNYC Right to Vote Committee held an election day demonstration on November 5. In pouring rain dozens of black youth and a handful of white LYS members marched through downtown Birmingham with placards that read: "Vote the American Way, Vote to Unchain the Ballot"; "Let Us Vote, We are Americans Too"; and "Poll Tax Denies Democracy." Hundreds of "Abolish the Poll Tax" buttons were distributed and SNYC literature littered the area. The determined marchers, a large number of whom were female, reminded a few onlookers of that fateful day in 1926 when Indiana Little led nearly one thousand black women to the Jefferson County courthouse steps to demand the right to vote. One passerby, an elderly woman, took special pride in the march though she did not participate. "We won't win the right to vote by sitting behind closed doors talking about it," she remarked. "These young people will bring a new day."⁴¹

In March 1941, in an effort to re-create what a "new day" might look like, SNYC and the LYS organized the first Alabama Youth Legislature. About 150 delegates assembled in Ensley's CIO Hall to draft and adopt mock bills that would "answer the needs of Alabama's Negro citizens, her poverty stricken youth in the cities and on the farm; her jobless school graduates; her voteless hundreds of thousands." The Alabama Youth Legislature hoped to set an example for the official state legislature by passing an array of labor, antiwar, civil liberties, and voting rights bills, and by reallocating imaginary defense funds to benefit the poor.⁴²

Two months later, SNYC, the SCHW, and the LYS declared May 11–

17 “Abolish the Poll Tax Week,” and planned nearly a full month of demonstrations, forums, and related programs to mobilize support for the Geyer anti-poll-tax bill. To coincide with the week's activities, the Communist Party held a conference in Birmingham on youth work in the South, attracting CP organizers from across the region. The events culminated in a joint Anti-Poll Tax and Right to Vote Conference sponsored by several organizations, including SNYC, the LYS, the SCHW, the Birmingham CIO Industrial Council, the AFU, the Birmingham *World*, and the black Elks and Masons. Assembling in Birmingham's First Congregational Church, the conferees listened to Joe Gelders, Ed Strong, Esther Cooper, William Mitch, the Reverend Fred Maxey, Laurent Frantz, and Mine Mill organizer Reid Robinson discuss, among other things, the role poll taxes play in disfranchising poor white and black voters in the South.⁴³

Like the Communist-led Right to Vote Club, SNYC's anti-poll-tax drive drew opposition from a variety of black organizations, including the Birmingham Negro Teachers' Association and the Alabama State Teachers' Association. But the campaign won far more friends than enemies, achieving a level of popular support from Birmingham's black community that had been beyond the reach of the Right to Vote Club. Along with the LYS, the SCHW, and several Birmingham Communists, SNYC helped create the Jefferson County Committee Against the Poll Tax, which waged a protracted local campaign during World War II. Indeed, until its demise in 1949, the Youth Congress directed most of its resources to winning the ballot for black people in the South.⁴⁴

The LYS and SNYC continued the civil liberties work started by the SCPR, which had ceased to exist after Joe Gelders assumed leadership of SCHW's civil rights committee. Young Birmingham radicals really had no choice. As the Dies Committee hearings and anti-Soviet sentiment fanned the flames of America's little Red Scare, the LYS and the CP, in particular, became prime targets of a renewed antiradical crusade. Throughout the spring and summer of 1940 the Birmingham police department's newly appointed “chief of un-American detail,” Ollie E Osborne, liberally invoked section 4902 of the criminal code to arrest suspected radicals. The ordinance authorized police to arrest without warrant “any person found under suspicious circumstances who fails to give a satisfactory account of himself” and to detain suspects for up to seventy-two hours without charge, thus allowing ample time to interrogate or intimidate radicals without having to file formal charges. In April 1940 Laurent Frantz was arrested and held incommunicado for forty-eight hours under section 4902. That Frantz was served a summons to testify before the Dies Committee in Washington, D.C., during his two-day detention was no coincidence. A

few weeks later, police raided the Communist-run Modern Bookshop and arrested Mary Southard (now the proprietor after Jane Speed wed Communist César Andreu Iglesias and moved to Puerto Rico) and two customers who had been perusing the shelves. The customers were eventually released, but Southard was detained for several hours under section 4902 without being charged. By mid-summer Osborne's unit had stepped up its activities considerably. Several suspected Communists were caught in the un-American detail's dragnet, including AFU vice-president Gerald Harris, Sr., who was arrested and detained for nine hours without charge.⁴⁵

It was 1934 all over again. The LYS and Joe Gelders, then secretary of the civil rights committee of the SCHW, campaigned for the repeal of section 4902 and distributed mimeographed handbills denouncing the recent arrests. Over the backdrop of an artist's rendering of Eugene "Bull" Connor holding a long red whip in his right hand, the handbill described the repressive atmosphere and vowed to challenge the ordinance's constitutionality in court. Law enforcement officials' liberal use of section 4902 was likened to fascism: "This is the kind of power that Hitler's secret police has in Germany." For distributing this "inflammatory" leaflet, Birmingham police arrested Malcolm Dobbs and Joe and Marge Gelders. Upon their release, Dobbs and Joe Gelders appeared before a regular meeting of the Birmingham City Commission and continued to compare the Birmingham ordinance with current practices in Nazi Germany. The repeal of section 4902, they argued, was mandatory for the preservation of democracy. In an impassioned address, the Reverend Dobbs announced it was "time for us to devote a real part of our attention to rooting out the enemies of democracy in our midst—to root them out and to remove the unconstitutional and undemocratic laws which permit them to jail people as Hitler jails the defenders of democracy in Nazi Germany."⁴⁶

Their pleas before the city commission fell upon deaf ears, however. As Joe Gelders put it, "The atmosphere of the meeting could hardly be exaggerated. There was a genuine lynch spirit." Gelders and the LYS then tried to fight the ordinance in court; but in every case police released the suspect before habeas corpus proceedings could be filed, and since the detainees could not be prosecuted on the basis of section 4902 alone, it was impossible to test the ordinance in a court of law. But more importantly, the Communists and the LYS fought alone. Birmingham liberals were either silent or completely in agreement with the use of police power to arrest and detain radicals. Indeed, while Birmingham radicals fought in vain to repeal section 4902, an Alabama statute was adopted that same year that outlawed any "flag, insignia, emblem or device" of any organization or nation "antagonistic to the constitution and laws of the United States, or to

those of the State of Alabama.”⁴⁷

SNYC also found itself in the thick of civil liberties issues. It was looked upon by ordinary blacks as an alternative NAACP, a legal defense organization in the same tradition as the old ILD. Complaints of police brutality, illegal arrests, and assorted episodes of courtroom injustice were frequently brought to SNYC's Birmingham office or passed on to local organizers in the vicinity. Although SNYC lacked the financial resources needed to take legal recourse, in most instances it attempted to bring local and national attention to these cases through petitions, demonstrations, and publicity campaigns—much like the ILD several years earlier. Their first major Alabama case involved Nora Wilson, a teenage black domestic worker from Elmore County who was serving time in Wetumpka Women's Prison for using abusive language to a white woman. The conflict began when the white woman, a Mrs. Woodburn, accused her employee Adrienne Wilson—Nora's eleven-year-old sister—of stealing six ears of corn. In defense of her sister, Nora engaged Woodburn in a heated argument and later that day was arrested. Without benefit of counsel, Wilson was indicted by a grand jury on August 23, 1940, for assault with intent to murder.

A few days before the grand jury hearing, Nora's mother described the incident to the Caravan Puppeteers following a performance in Elmore County; they in turn contacted SNYC's Birmingham office. Following an investigation by field representative Arthur Price, Jr., SNYC launched a mass campaign to free Nora Wilson that fall, and with some assistance from the LYS, secured an attorney to work for her defense. The governor's office and the offices of several Elmore County public officials received telegrams and petitions from across the country demanding Wilson's release. The campaign even prompted blacks in her hometown to form the Mill-brook, Alabama, Youth Council, which devoted most of its time and resources to her case. Consequently, Wilson was released less than a year later, all charges against her dismissed. The precedent set by the Scottsboro case played no small part in the Youth Congress's victory, for as one Wetumpka prison supervisor admitted, “This is a nigger case and we don't like publicity on these things.” He was sure to ask if SNYC had “any connection with the Scottsboro case—this case gave us a lot of bad publicity.”⁴⁸

Closer to home, many black Birmingham residents asked SNYC to investigate police brutality cases in the greater Birmingham area, an age-old issue in the black community that had been revived by the murder of black Fairfield resident O'Dee Henderson early in 1941. Arrested merely for arguing with a white man, Henderson was found

handcuffed in a Fairfield jail cell the next morning, his lifeless body beaten and riddled with bullets. The SNYC office issued a statement demanding a full investigation and the immediate prosecution of the officers involved. Within weeks of Henderson's murder a young black metal worker named John Jackson died at the hands of Fairfield police. It all began one May evening when officers Hubert Alexander and Ed Taylor responded to a local grocer's complaint that a line of black moviegoers waiting to enter a neighborhood theater blocked his store's entrance. In the line was John Jackson who, after exchanging harsh words with the two officers, was arrested, handcuffed, and forced into the backseat of their patrol car. By the time Alexander and Taylor had completed the four-block journey to the Fairfield police station, Jackson was dead.⁴⁹

Outraged by these two incidents, SNYC and the LYS demanded a full and impartial investigation of the Fairfield police department, and the NAACP, largely through the efforts of attorney Arthur Shores, unsuccessfully tried to file charges against Jackson's arresting officers. The district attorney, the city commission, and practically the entire Birmingham police force not only sided with the two officers but explained the rising tide of police shootings and beatings as acts of self-defense.⁵⁰

Less than two weeks after Jackson's death, yet another episode of police brutality was brought to light. The case of twenty-three-year-old Foster Powers attracted considerable attention because it occurred during Abolish the Poll Tax Week and indirectly involved Joe Gelders. Gelders happened to be in the neighborhood when he noticed officers beating Powers, who was handcuffed and confined to the backseat of a police vehicle. Unable to intervene in Powers's behalf, Gelders began collecting the names and addresses of witnesses. North Carolina Communist Junius Scales, a delegate who had accompanied Gelders to the Party's conference on youth, recalls the incident vividly: "Gelders, resembling a white-haired avenging angel, called to me, 'Get witnesses. Names, addresses, phone numbers!' I stepped into the crowd and was mobbed by Negroes offering the desired information." When police reinforcements arrived, Gelders was whisked off to jail for failing to assist an officer, and Powers was arrested for assault and disturbing the peace. (An LYS investigation later revealed that Powers, an epileptic, had had a seizure in a local movie theater and a misguided manager called the police rather than an ambulance.) Within two hours, leaflets were distributed throughout the black community protesting Powers's beating and Gelders's arrest. Two weeks later SNYC, the LYS, and the Communist Party formed the Jefferson County Committee Against Police Brutality.⁵¹

By the summer of 1941, the CP had made considerable progress toward reestablishing a radical movement in Birmingham. The youth-oriented organizations Communists began as well as those they influenced built a movement that focused on civil rights, full citizenship for African-Americans and poor whites, domestic and international peace, industrial unionism, and the preservation and improvement of American democracy as a whole. Furthermore, the people who made up this movement constructed a culture and a social world that tried to reproduce, in microcosm, the kind of interracial democracy they advocated in speeches and handbills. The situation in Birmingham was far from idyllic; police repression and red-scare politics still dominated the local scene. But radicals were finally beginning to rebuild bridges that had been singed—not completely burned—during the Popular Front.

News from across the Atlantic, however, shattered the momentary peace and pushed Birmingham's radical collective into the rough waters of international politics once again. On the morning of June 22, 1941, Communists learned that German troops had invaded the world's only socialist country. Once past the initial shock, Party members across the globe dropped antiwar slogans and joined the campaign to defend the Soviet Union. In Birmingham, SNYC, the LYS, the AFU, and local Communists led the charge, insisting that all democracy-loving people support the "people's war against Hitlerism." Unlike the Nazi-Soviet Pact, which took quite a bit of explaining, intervention was far more consistent with the Party's earlier antifascist politics. And yet the turnabout caused even further divisions between Communists and organized labor in Birmingham. When the *Southern News Almanac* published editorials by Sam Hall and AFU president Gerald Harris, Sr., supporting the war effort, local CIO leaders attacked the newspaper for "following the Communist party line." The CIO's own state organ took the position that the *Southern News Almanac* "should receive no support whatever from any CIO member."⁵²

SNYC and LYS activists threw themselves into the anti-Hitler campaign with unrestrained enthusiasm. When Malcolm Dobbs left his post as LYS executive secretary for the armed services, Communist Sidney Rittenberg assumed the vacancy during the summer of 1941 and immediately organized a series of programs dedicated to stopping "the Brown Plague of Nazism." Its newly created Youth V for Victory Committee put on several Smash Hitler programs throughout Birmingham, and its army welfare committees in the mines and mills worked hard to build support for the war effort. Likewise, SNYC sold Smash Hitler buttons, raised money for defense bonds, sponsored the Birmingham Citizens Army Welfare Committee, SNYC Victory

Mobilization Day, and a host of related organizations and programs devoted to mobilizing the black community behind the war.⁵³

Yet world conflict neither overshadowed nor undermined local efforts to fight racism in Birmingham. On the contrary, the anti-Hitler campaign strengthened the resolve of local radicals, especially SNYC activists, to completely overhaul democracy in the South. Nazi Germany became the standard by which Southern society would be judged. In his *Southern News Almanac* column, "Let Liberty Live," James E. Jackson published an exegesis aimed at both Germany and the South entitled "Don't Play Hitler's Game." Written in the form of a two-act play, the first scene opens with Adolph Hitler "clapping his hands in glee" as he examines photographs of black lynch victims in the South. In act two the war ends, Jim Crow has been abolished throughout the land, and "KKK Kleagles board trains under heavy guard on way to Leavenworth prison to join the German agents." Jackson's column, along with SNYC's slogan, "Freedom's Children to Arms," anticipated the Double V campaign national black leaders launched after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor. Indeed, in September 1941, SNYC's national council announced plans "to rally the Negro youth of the South for the defeat of Hitler abroad and K-K-K-ism at home."⁵⁴

Few progressive labor leaders, liberals, or African-Americans in Alabama could argue with Jackson's logic, especially after Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in December. The Party and its allied organizations found themselves siding with old enemies on both domestic and international affairs. As individuals, Birmingham radicals finally had an opportunity to make friends in the local world of liberal politics, but to do so required a complete shedding, or rather a covering up, of their Red attire. Because Communism was still a dirty word in Alabama, the Birmingham CP had no where else to go but back into the shadows of SNYC, the CIO, the LYS, the SCHW, and even the NAACP. And yet the Alabama Communist Party did not die in 1941. Instead it quietly influenced liberal, labor, and civil rights organizations through the work of individual activists whose politics were largely independent of national CPUSA policy. Thus, in a twisted sort of way, the Birmingham CP had come full circle: it was an "invisible army" once again.

Epilogue

Fade to Black: The Invisible Army in War, Revolution, and Beyond

I tried to get the Democratic Party to put in its platform a request to Congress to pass a law calling for the deportation of all communists—and if possible to fix it so the ship taking them to Russia would sink en route.

—Eugene “Bull” Connor, 1949

We had to beat it down so till we got [Martin Luther] King privilege to run the thing. . . . That's why he could work much faster.

—Lemon Johnson, former SCU leader

Alabama's “invisible army” had come a long way since the days when members of neighborhood committees and unemployed councils read Party newspapers, armed themselves with penny postcards and handbills, and occasionally cursed out a resident stoolpigeon. Founded as a tightly disciplined, underground movement composed of poor urban and rural blacks and a handful of white folks too hungry or too idealistic to let race stand in the way of fighting the bosses, the Alabama CP had become, by the 1940s, a kind of loosely organized think tank whose individual members exercised considerable influence in local labor, liberal, and civil rights organizations. They were still invisible, but their invisibility had changed: once able to hide behind innocent grins and starched overalls, in double tenant shotgun houses and rural shacks, in the ore mines, steel mills, and quiet cotton fields, many Communists now “hid” behind desks, podiums, in small offices and union halls, among respectable people. They had become labor organizers, civic spokespersons, and “race” leaders who belonged to SNYC, the Alabama Committee for Human Welfare, the CIO, the AFU, and other related organizations. If there was anything dubious or dishonest about their intentions, it was that they sought to do what they believed Communists should do—build a nonracist, democratic South—but understood the political limitations of identifying themselves as Party members.

Yet these women and men, veterans and neophytes alike, shared

something in common with the old Party. They responded to Central Committee and Comintern directives with blind faith, blissful ignorance, and bitter independence—and in the confusion of world war, Alabama Communists frequently showed signs of all three. “I believed it, sure, I believed it! I thought the bosses going to lay down with the workers, the wolves and the lambs going to lay together. I was teaching that, I was preaching that everywhere I went, in the union and everywhere.”¹ These are Hosea Hudson's words. As a veteran who had once described the Party as an army of the working class, Hudson's rosy picture of postwar America might seem rather strange. On the other hand, Hudson was expressing a sense of optimism that had gripped much of black America. Now that the U.S. was fighting a war against racism and injustice abroad, African-Americans wondered how racism on home soil could be justified.

But for Communists in the Deep South, especially blacks, skepticism overruled faith and reinforced their independence. Hudson, Henry O. Mayfield (before joining the army), and other black Communists in the CIO knew the war was not a panacea. They continued to fight racism within their respective unions and spoke persistently on the need for rank-and-file control and internal democracy. Although Hudson was elected president of Local 2815, United Steel Workers of America (CIO) in 1942, radicals in the union were beginning to lose their influence. The rapid wartime increase in white union membership, the CIO's conservative turn in the face of Dies Committee pressure, and workers' racist reaction to Roosevelt's Fair Employment Practices Committee eroded interracial unity within the CIO and further isolated union militants, especially in steel and coal. And the Party's official opposition to the UMWA's 1943 strike certainly did not help matters. Nevertheless, Communists were still influential in Mine Mill, especially Bessemer's District 5, and had begun to establish locals of the National Maritime Union in Mobile. Immediately following the infamous Mobile “race riot” of 1943, during which gangs of white dock workers, fearful of being replaced by black workers, assaulted blacks with crowbars and wrenches, the maritime union attracted hundreds of black longshoremen and dock workers who probably sought physical protection as well as union membership. By the time the union was expelled from the CIO in 1949, its locals in Mobile counted over twenty-five hundred members.²

While most black Communists believed war would inevitably alter Jim Crow in the South, they also understood—better than national Party leadership—that change would not happen by itself. Black Communists in SNYC promoted their own Double V program of action despite the Party's official opposition to the slogan. The Youth Congress fought racial discrimination in the armed forces, expanded

its voter registration drive, continued to investigate police brutality cases and civil liberties violations, collected a mountain of data on discrimination for the FEPC hearings in 1943, and even waged a campaign in Birmingham to end segregation on buses. Throughout most of the war SNYC was led by Esther Cooper (who had taken over as executive secretary after Ed Strong, James Jackson, and several other male leaders joined the armed forces) and Louis Burnham, SNYC's organizational secretary who joined the Birmingham staff in 1942 with his wife and co-worker Dorothy Burnham. Louis, a twenty-seven-year-old Communist with a degree in social science from City College of New York and a year of law school behind him, was a thoughtful and articulate leader who viewed the war as an incubator for future civil rights struggles. Influenced as much by Gandhi, Du Bois, and anticolonial resistance as by Marx and Lenin, Burnham suggested on numerous occasions that the European conflict marked a revolutionary moment for people of color throughout the world. He lectured on the Indian Communist Party in the anticolonial movement to local Birmingham activists and in January 1944 proposed forming a black political party under the slogan "Non-Violence and Non-Cooperation."³

Although the war remained a central component of SNYC's program until 1945, local and regional civil rights issues always took precedence. Under Burnham and Cooper's leadership—both of them were approaching thirty years of age—SNYC began to shed its youth-oriented image and emerged as a more seasoned black civil rights organization. Its closest local ally, the LYS, had folded around 1942 after most of its members either enlisted in the armed services, entered the labor movement, or accepted full-time positions in the SCHW. The Youth Congress, in turn, strengthened its ties with black social and fraternal clubs and mainstream black political organizations, particularly the NAACP. During the war the NAACP proved a welcome ally to SNYC, the CIO, and the SCHW, as well as an increasingly vocal proponent of civil rights. Louis Burnham's hope that SNYC would lead a militant Southern civil rights movement seemed well on its way to becoming a reality by the time the Sixth All-Southern Negro Youth Conference met in Atlanta in December 1944. The seven-year-old movement had attracted several prominent civil rights activists of the past and future, including Charles Gomillion, F. D. Patterson, Percy Sutton, Martin Luther King, Sr., Benjamin Mays, Ralph Abernathy, Modjeska Simkins, and Nannie Burroughs, to name but a few.⁴

Other left-leaning mass organizations did not fare as well as SNYC during the war. The SCHW in Alabama temporarily folded around 1942, partly because its most active Birmingham leader, Joe Gelders,

had joined the U.S. Army as an instructor. And the thorough character bashing it received from the Dies Committee had already weakened the Southern Conference from top to bottom. When the NNC made a last-ditch effort to establish chapters in Alabama, it too failed. Between 1943 and 1944, veteran black Communist Andy Brown (under the pseudonym “Oscar Bryant”) founded several small NNC chapters throughout the state that were called “Work Together Clubs,” largely for security reasons. In an effort to rebuild the Party's rural links, Brown established the majority of Work Together Clubs in Camp Hill, Opelika, and Waverly, and in the black belt cities of Montgomery and Selma. With the exception of the Montgomery club, which waged a lively voter registration campaign in 1944 under the leadership of William Anderson and Communist John Beans, the NNC accomplished very little in Alabama and its locals eventually folded in 1945—a year before the national organization's demise.⁵

Brown did succeed, however, in reestablishing relations between the Birmingham CP and Communists in Tallapoosa County, but he did so at a moment when the Party had little, if any, public presence and practically no autonomous organizational identity. Late in 1943 Rob Hall, Louis Burnham, Pauline Dobbs, and Hosea Hudson attempted to revive the Party's educational function in Birmingham by forming the Alabama Organization for Political Action, later renamed the “Good Neighbor Club.” Although intended to improve race relations and provide forums to discuss the burning political issues of the day, the Good Neighbor Club attracted only Communists and FBI agents.⁶

Hence the situation in May 1944, when Earl Browder decided to liquidate the CPUSA, form the Communist Political Association, and adopt what amounted to a procapitalist agenda. The Alabama CP, now led by Ordway Southard, followed Browder's lead and created the APEA in June 1944, although not without a fight. Several veterans opposed the idea from the start, including Communists in Camp Hill and Dadeville who simply bucked Browder's authority and refused to disband the Party. The APEA in Birmingham opened its doors to everyone (including the president of Jackson Foundries!), and its officers consisted of Party and non-Party people alike. Not only were its role and purpose unclear, but it became a hindrance to militants like Hudson, who was frequently asked by APEA members to tone down his criticism of CIO leaders for the sake of unity.⁷

Meanwhile, only weeks after the Party's liquidation, Pauline Dobbs, Louis Burnham, and thirty political and religious leaders reestablished an Alabama chapter of the SCHW. With Pauline Dobbs as secretary, the Alabama Committee for Human Welfare resumed where the LYS and the NCPR had left off, concentrating primarily on civil liberties

and voting rights. One of its first and perhaps most controversial cases involved Recy Taylor, a black woman who was kidnapped and raped by six white men in Abbeville, Alabama, none of whom were prosecuted. The Alabama Committee, SNYC, and the APEA formed the Committee for Equal Justice for Recy Taylor, which provided legal counsel and secured representatives from the National Federation of Constitutional Liberties to investigate the case.⁸

By the war's end, Birmingham's Communists—with the possible exception of CIO militants—looked to the future with glassy-eyed optimism. In 1945 the APEA successfully expanded its educational function by establishing a “School for Democracy” in Birmingham, which in turn attracted a few more non-Party people. Sam Hall, former editor of the *Southern News Almanac* and a Communist, was elected chairman of the Alabama Committee for Human Welfare that same year. While not everyone in the SCHW was aware of Hall's political affiliations, his election was nevertheless interpreted by Communists as proof that relations between radicals and liberals were improving. Furthermore, the Party found an ally in Aubrey Williams, a former New Dealer and native son who returned to Alabama in 1945 to edit the *Southern Farmer*. Williams turned the former Coughlinite paper into a pro-civil rights, prolabor, and anti-Cold War farmers' publication, which also served as the unofficial organ of the AFU. Although he distrusted the Communists and remained, for the most part, a reluctant collaborator, he provided critical support for virtually every program the Alabama CP and its allied organizations proposed.⁹

But just as the Alabama cadre began to settle into their respective roles as nonracist liberals, race-conscious trade unionists, and class-conscious race leaders, national and international Communist leadership made a sharp turn to the left. With a little help from French Communist Jacques Duclos, whose 1945 article sharply criticized the dissolution of the CPUSA, Browder and his ideas were kicked out and William Z. Foster assumed leadership of a newly reconstituted Party. The period following Foster's ascension to power and Browder's expulsion in February 1946 was marked by factional disputes, internal debates, name calling, and a wave of expulsions prompted by charges of Trotskyism, Browderism, Negro nationalism, and a host of other Left epithets. As the country moved right, the Party under Foster moved farther left and further into isolation, although Popular Front-style coalition politics lingered through the 1948 Progressive party campaign. On the eve of the greatest red scare in American history, Foster marched his Party directly into the eye of the storm.¹⁰

Alabama experienced some of the drama. During the Christmas holidays in 1945, black Party leader Benjamin Davis, Jr., traveled to

Birmingham and officially reestablished the Communist Party. Rob Hall, who had just returned from the army, and Ordway Southard were called up to New York to face charges of Browderism. Southard was removed from leadership in 1946 and Hall resumed Party work in Washington, D.C., but neither was expelled. Indeed, there is no evidence that any Alabama Communists were expelled during this period. The local cadre was just too small, and friendships apparently too deep, for national infighting to play itself out in Alabama. Besides, the Birmingham CP was experiencing its own postwar exodus: Ed and Augusta Strong had moved back to New York in 1945; Marge and Laurent Frantz were now in Nashville; Joe Gelders would eventually settle in California; James Jackson and Esther Cooper left for New Orleans in 1946 as open, full-time Communists; and a handful of rank-and-file recruits joined the nameless thousands who believed the urban North offered greater opportunities.¹¹

Surprisingly, the Alabama leadership's wartime agenda escaped with minimal disruption. Aside from the obvious shift from prowar to propeace and antinuclear politics, the Party's 1946 goals for the South continued to focus on voting rights and civil liberties, but with an added emphasis on housing and full employment. Although the demand for self-determination in the black belt was resurrected under Foster, prompting a heated debate among self-styled theoreticians, most Alabama Communists never gave the slogan a second thought.¹² Rather, those who remained pursued the largely independent political course set in the early 1940s. Upon his discharge from the army in 1946, Malcolm Dobbs took over his wife's position as secretary of the Alabama Committee for Human Welfare, which allowed Pauline Dobbs to enter Democratic party politics. She ran for state legislature that same year and polled nearly seven thousand votes, almost defeating her opponent in a runoff election. Meanwhile, Malcolm Dobbs directed most of the Alabama committee's resources to registering veterans to vote, fighting antilabor legislation, lobbying against the Boswell amendment (which would have allowed local registrars complete discretion in assessing voter qualification), and abolishing racially determined pay scales for Jefferson County teachers. He also supported Jim Folsom's bid for governor of Alabama in 1946, primarily because of his prolabor stance, opposition to the Boswell amendment, and mild support for voting rights legislation. Folsom's election was, in Malcolm Dobbs's words, "a people's victory." In short, the Dobbses refused to heed Foster's call for a return to revolutionary practice but were unwilling to break with the CP.¹³

The peace did not last very long, in part because national and regional Party leaders were not content to let class war bypass the Alabama cadre. Nat Ross, who returned to the region in 1946 as

Southern director, sought to restore the Party and recruit militant trade unionists by assuming a more public presence. Sam Hall, who had spent most of 1946 as district organizer for the Carolinas, was sent back to Alabama in 1947 to promote the CP and its policies with greater openness. Hall publicly identified himself as Alabama's leading Communist and ran a series of half- and full-page advertisements in Birmingham newspapers defending the Party's right to exist.¹⁴ The policy proved fatal, essentially aggravating an already intolerable political atmosphere. In 1947 the Alabama state legislature passed a series of anti-Communist bills requiring loyalty oaths from public school teachers and making Party membership a misdemeanor. About the same time, HUAC identified the SCHW as one of many "Communist fronts," sparking a current of internal dissension and suspicion. The war on Communism took a particularly nasty turn within the ranks of the Birmingham CIO. In November 1947 Hosea Hudson and three representatives from the United Office and Professional Workers Union (CIO)—Malcolm Dobbs, Pauline Dobbs, and Florence Castille—were expelled from the Birmingham Industrial Union Council for being Communists. Neither Hudson, the Dobbses, nor Castille—also a SNYC activist—openly admitted CP membership, nor was there sufficient evidence to link them to the Party. Nearly all black CIO members either voted against the action or walked out in disgust, arguing that the expulsions were unconstitutional.¹⁵

Postwar red-baiting in the South was accompanied by the rise of pro-segregationist sentiment, stimulated by, among other things, wartime black militancy, interracial competition for jobs and housing, and the Truman administration's support for civil rights. Indeed, the Ku Klux Klan, the League to Maintain White Supremacy, and the Alabama American Legion deftly appropriated Cold War language to legitimize white supremacy before the rest of the world. The racist response to Communism was not limited to white supremacist and conservative groups, however. After taking a strong stand against anti-Communist legislation throughout most of 1947, *Southern Labor Review* editor A. H. Cather assailed efforts to integrate colleges as "a part of communistic doctrine . . . aimed at America with the intention of provoking revolution." "To insist that Africans leave their own institutions and attend Aryans," Cather complained, "would place this nation in the ridiculous position of fighting communism abroad and encouraging it at home."¹⁶

Thus was the political climate when SNYC decided to hold its Eighth All-Southern Negro Youth Congress in Birmingham, Alabama, in the spring of 1948. As soon as Public Safety Commissioner Eugene "Bull" Connor found out about the intended conference, he began harassing black ministers who had offered their churches as a meeting

place. Consequently, all local black clergy withdrew, with the exception of twenty-three-year-old Rev. C. Herbert Oliver, pastor of Alliance Gospel Tabernacle. Throughout the three-day conference, police surrounded the tiny Alliance church and arrested several delegates, including Rev. Oliver, James Dombrowski, National Maritime Union organizer Edward Forrey, and Idaho senator Glen Taylor. Bail drained a huge chunk of SNYC's already dwindling treasury, and to make matters worse, nearly every distinguished member of its advisory board subsequently withdrew fearing association with a "Communist front." A year later Louis Burnham closed SNYC's Birmingham office and dissolved the organization.¹⁷

Birmingham's black middle-class leaders looked on in silence as their wartime allies—black CIO organizers, the SCHW, and SNYC—were being crushed by racist/anti-Communist repression. After a remarkable period of growth and militancy during the war, NAACP leaders thought it best to dissolve all relations with alleged radicals and return to anti-Communist choruses sung in the early 1930s. "We don't believe it would be good political sense for Negroes, a racial minority, to identify themselves with any radical political departures," wrote NAACP officer and Birmingham *World* editor Emory O. Jackson in 1948. Nevertheless, NAACP leaders were still red-baited for their stand on civil rights, despite their emphatic anti-Communist rhetoric.¹⁸

The Alabama CP made one last effort during Henry Wallace's 1948 presidential campaign. With Louis Burnham as Southern codirector, the Progressive party attracted virtually every radical left in the state. But Gideon's Alabama army turned out to be a tiny lot consisting of Communists, a few Mine Mill and AFU members, some remaining SNYC activists, a handful of Adamsville coal miners, and several interested independents. They met virulent opposition from most Alabamians—including the black middle class—which erupted in violence during Wallace's visit to Gadsden and Birmingham. Nevertheless, Wallace managed to get 1,522 votes, more than any Communist presidential candidate had ever tallied in Alabama.¹⁹

Once the elections were over, the Alabama CP entered its coldest winter yet. In 1949 the State Industrial Union Council gladly followed national CIO directives, expelling individuals suspected of Party membership as well as entire unions—most prominently the National Maritime Union and the International Union of Mine, Mill and Smelter Workers. Mine Mill's expulsion revealed, once again, the racial dynamics of organized labor on Red Mountain. A secessionist movement led by whites within Mine Mill pitted black ore miners and white radicals against the predominantly white and largely racist

Birmingham locals of the United Steel Workers of America. The steel workers eventually won a federally arbitrated consent election in 1949, but only after resorting to racist and anti-Communist propaganda, KKK-style intimidation, and physical assault.²⁰

Both the Birmingham police and the Ku Klux Klan declared full-scale war on suspected Communists. In 1950 the city council passed an ordinance, authored by Eugene “Bull” Connor, effectively outlawing the Communist Party in Birmingham, and a year later the state enacted the Alabama Communist Control Law requiring all Party members and Communist “front” organizations to register with the Department of Public Safety or face fines up to \$10,000 and/or two to ten years in prison. Known Communists were arrested and harassed on a daily basis; their homes became prime targets for cross-burnings. By 1951 the repression and isolation had become too much for the Alabama cadre to handle. The tiny band of fugitives opted to disband the CP, and many of them found it necessary to flee the state altogether.²¹

With the passage of the state Communist Control Law, the Alabama CP and practically all of its auxiliary organizations ceased to exist. The efficacy of Southern Cold War ideology—anchored in racist reaction, xenophobia, and postwar competition for jobs and housing—and the unmitigated use of legal and extralegal coercion dealt the final blow. Yet, while the role of anti-Communism cannot be overemphasized, it was not the sole reason for the Party's demise. Having lost its mass base during the Popular Front, in part because district leadership dissolved the SCU, shifted from neighborhood-based organizing to coalition politics, and directed most of its energy and resources to building the CIO at the expense of the Party, the CP was not in a position to stave off popular opposition. Although SNYC managed to sustain a large following during the war, it was especially vulnerable to red-baiting after 1947 since most of its supporters were anti-Communist or indifferent. On the other hand, SNYC might have weathered the postwar storm if it had had a more open relationship with the CP, but it would have been considerably smaller and less influential.

The collapse of an organization does not necessarily signify the destruction of a movement or the eradication of traditions of radicalism. Indeed, American Communism itself was born of several radical streams that can be traced to Socialists, Wobblies, and radical European immigrants—streams that were never fused consciously. Likewise, young white Communists arrived in Birmingham seeking to extend this “evolved” form of American Communism throughout the South but were overwhelmed by different streams of oppositional

thought and practice rooted in Southern, especially African-American, history and culture. Upon its Euro-American left-wing frame was placed, among other things, a heritage of agrarian radicalism, limited interracial labor militancy, evasive and cunning forms of resistance, prophetic Christian ideology, “race” consciousness, and intraracial class conflict.

Because the Party remained essentially “invisible” and its opponents made a concerted effort to erase or alter its history, the CP's legacy is not always easy to locate in Alabama. Nevertheless, on the eve of the so-called modern civil rights movement a few surviving radicals quietly brought their experience, knowledge, and memories to the organizations of the day. The aging Montgomery Party leader John Beans joined the Montgomery Improvement Association during the bus boycott, and he was joined by several former SNYC activists, many of whom recalled the Citizens Committee for Equal Accommodations on Common Carriers founded by SNYC thirteen years earlier. But becoming part of the new revolution was easier said than done. Civil rights leaders themselves fought nearly as hard as “Bull” Connor to extirpate suspected Communists from the movement. During the early 1950s, for example, Bessemer's most prominent civil rights activist was Mine Mill organizer Asbury Howard—a Progressive party organizer, CIO leader, and avid SNYC supporter who had been close to the CP since the war. As president of the Progressive Voters League and vice-president of the Bessemer NAACP, Howard turned to the CP-led Civil Rights Congress for assistance on several occasions between 1951 and 1953, which did little to improve relations between national NAACP leadership and the Bessemer branch. In fact, Walter White was so fearful of Howard's activities and Mine Mill's supposed Communist links that in 1953 he dispatched NAACP labor relations assistant Herbert Hill to investigate the Bessemer branch's role in the fight between the steel workers' union and Mine Mill. Hill censured Bessemer branch leadership for having “assisted Communist-controlled unions in opposition to the CIO.”²²



Segregated audience in Montgomery awaits Henry Wallace, 1948. Note the rope demarcating separate seating areas, (courtesy Alabama magazine)

Of course, any effort to uncover direct links between the CP and the modern civil rights movement would be futile and might reinforce stereotypes of Communists as conspirators. But to deny any linkages whatsoever ignores a twenty-year legacy of radicalism that had touched thousands of Alabamians. While it is ludicrous to imagine rank-and-file committees or Party cells developing within the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, there have been moments when the old radical traditions invaded and influenced Alabama movement politics in the 1960s. One startling example comes from Lowndes County exactly thirty years after the bloody cotton pickers' strike of 1935. In 1965 young Stokely Carmichael and a handful of SNCC organizers moved into this black belt county to launch a local voter registration drive and to form an independent political party. The tiny band of nonviolent student activists was somewhat startled when poor farmers of all ages, especially the older folk, came to meetings enthusiastic and fully armed. As one local sharecropper told Carmichael, "You turn the other cheek, and you'll get handed half of what you're sitting on." And yet the same folks taught their young "leaders" how to don the mask of deference and humility. They evoked images of Lowndes County radicals of thirty years ago, namely CP and SCU leaders Ed Bracey, Jim Press Merriweather, Annie Mae Merriweather, Smith Watkins, Willie Witcher, and a host of others.²³

Among the local leaders was an older fellow by the name of Charles Smith, a former member of the SCU and participant in the 1935 strike. Smith, who also devoted several years to CIO organizing on the docks of Mobile, was a movement veteran by the time Carmichael,

Courtland Cox, Jonathan Daniels, and others turned his home into SNCC's living and working quarters. Smith provided more than sustenance—he offered leadership. In the face of violence and death threats he was elected president of the Lowndes County Christian Movement and subsequently served four terms as county commissioner.²⁴

How much these young activists knew about the SCU, the Communists, or the 1935 cotton pickers' strike in Lowndes before their arrival is difficult to determine. (It is ironic, however, that Carmichael was very close to Gene Dennis, Jr., son of the former national CPUSA general secretary, and that he had had extended discussions with Benjamin Davis, Jr., a black Communist since the thirties who was quite familiar with the SCU's history.) The fact is, the events of 1935 comprised part of the collective memory of Lowndes County blacks in 1965. The armed and poor sharecroppers who followed Carmichael's lead brought a lot from their past to the new movement, including what the CP and the SCU had left behind. Some might have been Young Pioneers or YCL members in the early days, others might have listened to elders tell tales of the union's exploits. Most probably looked to SNCC like their foremothers and forefathers looked to the Communists: the Yankees were back again to give deliverance one more try.

Even if the Party's legacy indirectly contributed to the 1960s revolution, it left a mark neither participants nor historians have recognized. Indeed, as civil rights and black power slogans began to fade from memory, the public silence surrounding Alabama's radical past gave way to nostalgia. In the 1970s both Hosea Hudson and Ned Cobb—a participant in the 1932 Reeltown shoot-out—were the subjects of magnificent narratives, and Cobb's story was adapted to the stage in 1989 as a one-man show starring Cleavon Little. More surprisingly, in 1982 the Birmingham City Council awarded Hudson the key to the city for his role in founding the Right to Vote Club forty-four years earlier. By recognizing Hudson's achievements, city officials wished to neither celebrate nor legitimize the movement to which he devoted fifty-seven years of his life. On the contrary, their speeches and accolades merely eulogized an era too distant to haunt them. Birmingham's civic leaders, elected officials, business people, and law enforcement officers were confident that their city's radical past was safely buried in the memories of old folk. But among those applauding Hudson's award were members of the local Paul Robeson Club, activists in the Birmingham branch of the National Alliance Against Racist and Political Repression (a descendant of the ILD, the NCDPP, and the NCPR), and organizers from the Southern Organizing Committee for Economic and Social Justice—a direct descendant of

the SCHW. Soldiers and architects of today's invisible army, these women and men continued to fight the Klan, investigate civil liberties violations, organize welfare recipients, register voters, fight for improved public education and health care, hold political discussion groups in modest shotgun houses in the black community, and dream of a world where such work would be unnecessary.²⁵

Most young Alabama radicals who had the opportunity to shake Hudson's hand in 1982 probably knew close to nothing about the struggles of fifty and sixty years ago. Like Hudson's comrades in the 1930s, who knew just as little about the Union Leagues and black militias during Reconstruction, the Knights of Labor, the Populists, and the UMWA during the 1890s, the new radicals unwittingly constructed a movement rooted in the past and shaped by the present. When they finally met the old, brown-skinned ex-iron molder, they discovered a living example of a history lost.

Notes

ABBREVIATIONS

In addition to the abbreviations found in the text, the following abbreviations are used in the notes.

ACLU Papers

Bound papers of the American Civil Liberties Union, Princeton University Library

ACLU Records

Microfilmed records of the American Civil Liberties Union

BPRM

Birmingham Papers and Related Materials, Birmingham Public Library

BUL Papers

Birmingham Urban League Papers, Birmingham Public Library

BWDS (Notebooks)

Hosea Hudson's undated written recollections for *Black Worker in the Deep South*, in Box 1, Hosea Hudson Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

CIC Collection

Commission on Interracial Cooperation Collection

CJP

Clyde Johnson Papers, part of *The Green Rising: Supplement to the Southern Tenant Farmers Union Papers*, microfilm, reels 13–16

CMS Collection

Carnegie-Myrdal Study, "The Negro in America: Research Memoranda for Use in Preparation of Dr. Gunnar Myrdal's *An American Dilemma*," microfilm, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

COHP

Columbia Oral History Project, Columbia University

CRC Papers

Civil Rights Congress Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture

CRDP

Civil Rights Documentation Project, Moorland-Springarn Research Center, Howard University

DW

Daily Worker

Fish Committee Hearings

U.S. Congress. House. Special Committee on Communist Activities in the U.S. *Investigation of Communist Propaganda*.
71st Cong., 2d sess. Washington, D.C., 1930

FPG Papers

Frank Porter Graham Papers, Southern Historical Collection,
University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

JMJ Papers

James Marion Jones Papers, Alabama Department of Archives
and History

La Follette Committee Hearings

U.S. Congress. Senate. Committee on Education and Labor.
*Violations of Free Speech and Rights of Labor: Hearings before a
Subcommittee of the Committee on Education and Labor*.
Washington, D.C., 1936–41

MID Records

Records of the U.S. Military Intelligence Division,
Correspondence, File 10110–2664, RG 165

NAACP Papers

Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of
Colored People, Legal files and Branch files, Manuscript
Division, Library of Congress.

NPHH Collection

Nell Painter/Hosea Hudson Collection, Southern Oral History
Program, Southern Historical Collection, University of North
Carolina, Chapel Hill

OHAL

Oral History of the American Left, Tamiment Institute, New
York

SFL

Southern Farm Leader

SOHP

Southern Oral History Program, Southern Historical
Collection, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill

SNA

Southern News Almanac

SW

Southern Worker

WLC

Working Lives Collection, Archives of American Minority
Cultures, University of Alabama, Tuscaloosa

WPA Records

UMWJ

United Mine Workers Journal

WW

Working Woman

YW

Young Worker

PREFACE

1 North, *No Men Are Strangers*, 227.

2 De Grazia, "For a Social History of Politics"; Fox-Genovese and Genovese, *Fruits of Merchant Capital*, 177–212; Kraditor, "Jimmy Higgins"; Bakhtin, *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*, 135.

3 Painter, *Narrative*, 16.

4 A few examples include Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*; Howe, *The American Communist Party*; Record, *The Negro and the American Communist Party*; Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People*; Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*; Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*; Dyson, *Red Harvest*; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*; and Charles Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case*. There are some recent exceptions, however. See especially Korstad, "Daybreak of Freedom"; Honey, "Labor, the Left, and Civil Rights in the South"; Honey, "The Popular Front in the American South"; Naison, "Black Agrarian Radicalism"; and Ingalls, *Urban Vigilantes*.

5 See articles and letters by Theodore Draper, Paul Buhle, James R. Prickett, James R. Barrett, Rob Ruck, Norman Markowitz, Al Richmond, Mark Naison, Roy Rosenzweig, Maurice Isserman, and others in *New York Review of Books*, May 9, 30, August 15, 1985; for an overview, see also Isserman, "Three Generations."

6 Robert F. Hall, "Those Southern Liberals," 492.

PROLOGUE

1 Leighton, *Five Cities*, 100.

2 Armes, *Story of Coal and Iron*, esp. 239–42, 268–78, 280; Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, 12–20; Henley, *This is Birmingham*, 15–96; Kulik, "Black Workers and Technological Change,"

24; Justin Fuller, "From Iron to Steel"; Gregg, *Origin and Development of TCI*; Weiner, *Social Origins of the New South*, 168–82; Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 126–29. For a vivid pictorial description of Birmingham's early steel industry, see Menzer and Williams, "Southern Steel," and Barbara J. Mitchell, "Steel Workers in a Boom Town."

3 Vance, *Human Geography of the South*, 302–3; Wright, *Old South, New South*, 170.

4 Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, esp. 52–53; Brownell, "Birmingham," 43–44; Comer, *Braxton Bragg Comer*; Atkins, *The Valley and the Hills*, 130; Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama*, 79–80; quotation from Leighton, *Five Cities*, 102–3.

5 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Thirteenth Census, 1910: Population*, 4:538–39; Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, 187; Worthman, "Black Workers and Labor Unions in Birmingham"; Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, 182–208; Brittain, "Negro Suffrage and Politics in Alabama," 148; Steven F. Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 89.

6 Brownell, "Birmingham," 28; Walker interview (BPRM), 4; Moton interview with author; Hudson interview with author; Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, 25–26; Worthman, "Working Class Mobility in Birmingham," 205; Federal Writers' Project, *Alabama*, 166–67; Giddens, "Happy-Go-Lucky Harlem of the South."

7 Brownell, "Birmingham," 28; Franklin D. Wilson, "The Ecology of a Black Business District," 358; Homady, *The Book of Birmingham*, 68–69; Atkins, *The Valley and the Hills*, 79, 82, 97; Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 133–38. On Birmingham's black electorate, see Lewinson, *Race, Class, and Party*, 218, and for a broader discussion of black elite social life, see Gatewood, "Aristocrats of Color."

8 Council, "The Future of the Negro"; Reynolds, "The Alabama Negro Colony in Mexico"; Hamilton, *Alabama*, 93; Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, 186; on Hobson City, see Blackmon, *A Story of the Progress and Achievements*, 10–13. Leading white advocates of colonization included John Temple Graves and John Tyler Morgan.

9 Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, 35; Flynt, "Spindle, Mine, and Mule," 390, and "Folks Like Us," 226.

10 Chapman, "Occupations of Women in Alabama"; Flynt, *Mine, Mill, and Microchip*, 140–44, and "Spindle, Mine, and Mule," 387–88; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 3(1): 122; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fourteenth Census, 1920: Population*, 4:132, 148, 368.

11 William Harris, *The Harder We Run*, 26; Schweninger, "James

Rapier and the Negro Labor Movement”; Abernathy, “The Knights of Labor in Alabama”; Rogers and Ward, *Labor Revolt in Alabama*, 24–28; Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 21–22; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 15–16; Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 49; Kann, “The Knights of Labor”; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 40–41; McLaurin, *The Knights of Labor in the South*, chap. 3, 136–38, 145–47; Fink, *Workingmen’s Democracy*; Painter, *Standing at Armageddon*, esp. 44–50.

12 For more on Alabama populism, see Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*; Rogers, *One Gallused Rebellion*; Flynt, “Spindle, Mine, and Mule,” 383–385; Rogers, “The Negro Alliance in Alabama.”

13 Alabama Department of Labor, *Annual Report, 1938*, 32; Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 355; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 41–44; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 21. Between 1906 and 1911, the coal mines in Jefferson County employed an average of fifteen hundred convicts per year. Although TCI stopped leasing convicts for the mines in 1911, the system was in operation in Jefferson County until 1927 (Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, 202–5; U.S. Congress, House, *Hearings before the Committee on Investigation of U.S. Steel*, 4:2962, 2982, 3111–12; Moore, *History of Alabama*, 814–17; Elizabeth Bonner Clark, “The Abolition of the Convict Lease System in Alabama”). On the coal miners’ strike and the race issue, see Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions*, 316–20; Leighton, *Five Cities*, 123; Straw, “The Collapse of Biracial Unionism,” and “This is Not a Strike”; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 15–16, 21–24, 27, 52–53; Worthman, “Black Workers and Labor Unions in Birmingham.”

14 Fitch, “The Human Side of Large Outputs”; Rikard, “George Gordon Crawford,” 244–49; Hart, *Social Problems of Alabama*, 81; Brownell, “Birmingham,” 27; Leighton, *Five Cities*, 128–29; Alexander interview (WLC), 3, 7; Birmingham Historical Society, *Village Creek*, 67; U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Housing by Employers in the United States*, 31, 69–71.

15 Alabama Department of Labor, *Annual Report, 1938*, 33; Straw, “The United Mine Workers,” 104–28; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 51–61; Gross, “Strikes in the Coal, Steel, and Railroad Industries.”

16 Spero and Harris, *The Black Worker*, 286, 354; Worthman, “Working Class Mobility in Birmingham”; Kulik, “Black Workers and Technological Change”; Bond, *Negro Education in Alabama*, 233; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 49–50. On the policies of the ASFL, see Worthman, “Black Workers and Labor Unions in Birmingham,” 76–78; Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 88, 93; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 32–36. For examples of blacklisting during the 1920s, see Alexander interview (WLC), 3–5.

17 Terborg-Penn, "Afro-Americans in the Struggle for Woman Suffrage," 285; Lee N. Allen, "The Woman Suffrage Movement in Alabama"; Leighton, *Five Cities*, 125–26; Frederickson, "'I Know Which Side I'm On,'" 169–70. See Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, chap. 3, for an excellent discussion of the Southern YWCA and women's interracialism during the first two decades of the twentieth century.

18 *International Socialist Review* 9, no. 4 (October 1908): 309; Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 14, 41; on Barber see Atkins, *The Valley and the Hills*, 100, 102; Carl V. Harris, *Political Power in Birmingham*, 85, 87, 111. Part of Barber's success can be attributed to the fact that he did not announce his Socialist affiliation until *after* the election.

19 For a discussion of the Socialist party in the Southwest, see Vidrine, "Negro Locals"; McWhiney, "Louisiana Socialists"; and James Green, *Grass Roots Socialism*.

20 E. F. Andrews, "Socialism and the Negro," 524–25. J. B. Osborne shared Andrews's optimism when he wrote that the South constituted "the most important field for Socialist propaganda and organization." (Osborne, "Socialism in the South," 159.)

21 Brownell, "Birmingham," 37; Snell, "Fiery Crosses," and "Masked Men in the Magic City," 207–9; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 291–306; Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 137–38; Hamilton, *Hugo Black*, 65, 84, 95, 113.

22 Flynt, "Organized Labor, Reform, and Alabama Politics"; Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 44; Brownell, "Birmingham," 27.

23 Report of E. Newdick, War Labor Board, March 5, 1919, and George Haynes to Secretary of Department of Labor, March 7, 1919, File No. 8/102-D, Special Problems-Birmingham, 1919, Department of Labor Records, 174. See also *Birmingham Reporter*, February 1, 8, March 8, June 21, 1919, June 19, 1920; *Birmingham News*, June 21, 1920.

24 *Negro World*, August 19, 1922. In February 1923, twenty-three people from North Birmingham contributed to the UNIA's "New Orleans Defense Fund," but there was no division listing for these individuals (*Negro World*, February 24, 1923). The emigration scheme was initiated during World War I by black Birmingham businessman Joe Thomas. His primary interest was to develop commercial contacts with the Cameroons (Memo from Dr. Joe Thomas, n.d., and Circular Letter, n.d., Box 241, *National Republic* Files).

25 *Negro World*, December 1, 1923, August 14, 1926, June 4, 1927,

August 8, October 3, November 14, 1931; Hill, *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 4:667. Just outside Prichard was a tiny community called “Afriky Town,” the purported spot where the last boatload of slaves to America was deposited. In 1941, the Federal Writers’ Project guide to Alabama declared that the residents of Afriky Town “still have many customs and beliefs brought from Africa” (Federal Writers’ Project, *Alabama*, 359; Hill, *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 5:667). The UNIA was successful in other parts of the South, however, the only exceptions being Mississippi and Alabama (Hill, *Marcus Garvey Papers*, 3:539; *Negro World*, January 15, August 12, 1922; Stein, *The World of Marcus Garvey*, 153–70).

26 Autrey, “The NAACP in Alabama,” 13–14, 59.

27 Ibid., 61, 63, 67, 96–99; *Birmingham Reporter*, December 23, 1922. On Indiana Little, see Brittain, “Negro Suffrage and Politics in Alabama,” 177–79.

28 LaMonte, “Politics and Welfare in Birmingham,” 160; Bailey, “Ten Trying years,” 49; Adamson, “Coal Production in Alabama”; *UAB News*, February 15, June 15, 1931; Henderson, “Relief in Jefferson County,” 9.

CHAPTER ONE

1 For a copy of the original text as well as related documents revealing the debate over self-determination, see James S. Allen and Foner, *American Communism and Black Americans*, 163–200. The history of the black belt thesis is much too complex to discuss here, and few historians agree as to the relative importance of the Comintern versus African-American input. See, for example, Draper, *American Communism and Soviet Russia*, 320–50; Margaret Jackson, “Evolution of the Communist Party’s Position”; Kanet, “The Comintern and the ‘Negro Question,’” 89–90, 101–4; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 5–20; Record, *The Negro and the American Communist Party*, 56–65; Robinson, *Black Marxism*, 304–6; Frank Scott, “An Inquiry into the Communist Program,” 16–28, 44–56; Solomon, “Red and Black,” 80–155.

2 SW, December 13, 1930; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 36; William Z. Foster, “The Workers’ (Communist) Party in the South,” *Communist* 7 (November 1928): 676–81; quotation from DW, February 25, 1929; see also DW, April 19, May 29, 1930; Jim Allen, “Voice from the South,” *Labor Defender* 5 (November 1930): 221; Workers (Communist Party) of America, *Program and Constitution*, 13.

3 On the Communists' role in the North and South Carolina textile strikes in 1929, see Dunne, *Gastonia*; Beal, *Proletarian Journey*, 27–135; Weisbord, *A Radical Life*, 182–83, 186–87, 207–8, 270–71, and Weisbord, “Gastonia 1929,” 185–203; Draper, “Gastonia Revisited,” 3–29; Pope, *Millhands and Preachers*, 239–95.

4 James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 61–62; CPUSA, *Struggles Ahead!* 27; Central Committee, CPUSA, *Thesis and Resolutions for the Seventh National Convention*, 63.

5 James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 29; “Testimony of Fred McDuff,” *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 92–94; “Trade Union Unity League Mass Meeting—Workers of Birmingham—White Workers—Negro Workers!” leaflet (copy), *ibid.*, 92, 177; *DW*, March 25, April 2, 1930; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, March 30, 1930.

6 “Extracts from a Report of a Private Detective at Gastonia, North Carolina, Dated November 19, 1932,” Box 2847, MID Records; Birmingham *News*, May 23, 1930; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 75–78. Although Herndon claims the meeting took place in June, the actual date was May 22. Herndon uses pseudonyms for Communist organizers—“Frank Williams” is Frank Burns, “Tom Wilson” is Tom Johnson, and “John Lindley” is Walter Lewis.

7 For background on Herndon's life, see Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 3–64; Entin, “Angelo Herndon,” chap. 1; Herndon, *You Cannot Kill the Working Class*, 1; Charles Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case*, 8. During this period Herndon used the name “Eugene Braxton.” Herndon's given name was Eugene Angelo Braxton Herndon.

8 Tom Johnson to All Unions and Other Working-Class Organizations, May 16, 1930 circular letter, and “Stop the Murder of Workers' Leaders,” leaflet, *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 146–47, 170; Birmingham *Post*, May 30, 1930; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 84–85; “Testimony of Fred McDuff,” *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 92; *DW*, June 5, 1930; Angelo Herndon, “My Life,” (manuscript, n.d.), p. 8, ILD Papers, reel 18. The Atlanta Six, as they were called, consisted of Mary Dalton, a young white Communist from New York; Ann Burlack, a nineteen-year-old organizer for the National Textile Workers Union in South Carolina; M. H. Powers and Joe Carr, two Atlanta Communists; and two black Party members, Henry Story and Herbert Newton. At the time of the arrest Newton was using the name Gilmer Brady. See especially, Birmingham *News*, April 18, 21, 1930; *Liberator*, May 24, 1930; Atlanta *Constitution*, May 22, 1930; W. Wilson, “Atlanta's Communists”; Charles Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case*, 22–23; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 345–46.

9 City Commission of the City of Birmingham, *The General Code*,

1930, 243; “Minutes of the City Commission, City of Birmingham,” June 17, 1930, p. 491; *Birmingham News*, June 17, 1930; *Birmingham Post*, June 17, 1930; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, June 17, 1930; *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 95, 158; *Birmingham News*, June 19, 27, 1930; *DW*, June 20, 1930.

10 *DW*, June 20, 1930; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 93; “Monster Mass Protest Meeting at Capitol Park, Twentieth Street and Seventh Avenue, Saturday, June 21, At 3 PM,” leaflet (copy), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 127; “Testimony of Fred McDuff,” *ibid.*, 93, 95; *Birmingham News*, June 29, 1930; Cason, *90° in the Shade*, 80. Those arrested with Lewis were Frank Burns, Harry Jackson, and two black Birmingham recruits, Fred Walker and B. F. Jones. Although Birmingham police took credit for forcing Lewis to leave the state, he had planned to leave all along because he was suffering from tuberculosis, which was aggravated during his brief tenure on a Tennessee chain gang. The Party sent him to a Soviet sanatorium to recover, but he died one year later (*Negro Worker* 1 [June 1931]: 1).

11 *DW*, July 4, 8, 1930; “Testimony of Fred McDuff,” *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 95–98; “Confidential Report on Communist Activities,” (1930), p. 2., Folder 21, Box 88, *National Republic Files*; Charles Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case*, 25; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 96–97, 100–102. Nearly all Communists arrested in 1930, were convicted under Section 6028 of the City Ordinance of 1930 which defined vagrants as those who “wander about in idleness” who may lead an “immoral profligate life with no property sufficient for [their] support” or people “without visible means of support.” Ironically, Section 6031 states that those involved in labor disputes cannot be considered vagrants (City Commission of the City of Birmingham, *The General Code*, 1930, 325).

12 Central Committee, CPUSA, *Thesis and Resolutions for the Seventh National Convention*, 54–60; “Resolution on Workers’ Defense of the District Bureau, District 17, Communist Party of the United States of America” (n.d.), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 130–32; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 29.

13 *DW*, February 19, March 7, 1930; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 41–42. Allen and his wife used a series of pseudonyms. He adopted “James Bigelow” for a while, and his wife often went by “Helen Marcy.” Eventually he took the name “James Allen,” the name by which most people have come to know him (51–52). For biographical background on Allen, see Johnpoll and Klehr, *Biographical Dictionary of the American Left*, 3.

14 *SW*, August 16, November 15, 1930; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 185.

15 James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 62. Police estimated two or three thousand "members and sympathizers" ("Testimony of Fred McDuff," *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1[6]: 99).

16 Quotation from Central Committee, CPUSA, *Thesis and Resolutions for the Seventh National Convention*, 58; SW, October 18, November 1, 1930; "Working Class against Capitalist Class Sole Election Issue of Communist Party," pamphlet (copy), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 117. See also, "Boycott Bosses Jim Crow Primaries—Vote Communist This Fall," leaflet (copy), *ibid.*, 157.

17 SW, November 22, 1930; Central Committee, CPUSA, *Fight against Hunger*; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, November 12, 14, 1930; Birmingham *Post*, November 12, 1930; Birmingham *News*, November 14, 1930; "A Government Conspiracy Against the Working Class—Congress Prepares New Anti-Labor Laws," leaflet (copy), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 151–52; "Testimony of Achmed H. Mundo," *ibid.*, 185–86; "Testimony of Fred McDuff," *ibid.*, 101–3; "Testimony of John G. Murphy," *ibid.*, 197–99. For more on the Fish Committee's origins, see Delacy, "Congressional Investigation of Black Communism," 48–52; Wreszin, "The Dies Committee," 288.

18 James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 62; DW, January 28, 1931; SW, January 31, 1931; Dyson, *RedHarvest*, 86; "Southern Bulletin—March, 1931, A-375," p. 4, Box 2847, MID Records; "Communication from Alabama Farmers Committee of Action," *Journal of the House of Representatives of Alabama, Extra Session, 1933*, 459.

19 Birmingham *News*, April 25, 1930; LaMonte, "Politics and Welfare," 168–69; Birmingham *News*, April 5, 1930.

20 "Mass Demonstration against Unemployment at Capitol Park, Twentieth Street and Seventh Avenue, Monday, September 1," leaflet (copy), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 156. See also Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 105–7, 109–10; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 28. For background on the history and development of the Unemployed Councils in 1930, see Leab, "'United We Eat'"; Prago, "The Organization of the Unemployed," 55–60; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 49–56; and Rosenzweig, "Organizing the Unemployed."

21 "Unemployed Workers of TCI," leaflet (copy), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 155; "Steel Workers of Ensley Fight for Work or Bread," leaflet (copy), *ibid.*, 154; SW, December 27, 1930.

22 For descriptions of these practices, see Essie Davis interview (WLC), 3–5; Benson interview (WLC), 15; Curtis Maggard interview (WLC), 6, 13–15; Painter, *Narrative*, 100, 157–59; Clyde Johnson to

author, April 10, 1989.

23 Quotation from Price interview (WLC), 7. Several WLC interviews provide rich descriptions of urban farming as a depression survival strategy. See especially Jerald interview, 9; Andrews interview, 21; Benson interview, 15; George J. Brown interview, 3; Bryant interview, 6; Chandler interview, 3; Darden interview, 12–13; Gibson interview, 6; also, McClindon, Oral Testimony (BPRM), 1. The data on livestock and gardening are from Bailey, “Ten Trying Years,” 51, and J. D. Dowling et al., “Consolidated Report and Analysis,” 5.

24 Rikard, “An Experiment in Welfare Capitalism,” 270–79; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 79.

25 Birmingham *Post*, February 23, 1931; Douglas L. Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 36; quotation from SW, January 17, 1931. On the city commission's efforts, see LaMonte, “Politics and Welfare,” 169–71.

26 LaMonte, “Politics and Welfare,” 204–6; Henderson, “Relief in Jefferson County,” 9; “Minutes of the City Commission, City of Birmingham,” November 18, 1930, p. 139; Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 105–6; Douglas L. Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 36–37, 41.

27 Gadson interview (BPRM), 2; LaMonte, “Politics and Welfare,” 210, 212; Birmingham *News*, April 11, November 11, 1932; Bailey, “Ten Trying Years,” 71–72; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 77–79; quotation from DW, December 5, 1932. For rich, firsthand descriptions of Red Cross work by Birmingham blacks, see the following WLC interviews: March, 13–15; Lera Maggard, 3, 16; Essie Davis, 5–6.

28 SW, April 18, September 19, 1931; Al Murphy, District Agitprop Director and Political Education, “What is Going on in Birmingham and Vicinity,” memo, n.d., Box 2847, MID Records; Communication from James [Donald] Burke of Unemployed Councils of Alabama, 1931, Drawer 50, Governor Miller Papers; also reprinted in *Journal of the House of Representatives of Alabama, Extra Session, 1933*, 459–60.

29 Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 100, 138–40; SW, January 24, April 18, May 9, October 10, 1931; Clyde Johnson to author, April 10, 1989; Washington interview (WLC), 35–36; WW, September 1934. For a discussion of unemployed councils' tactics in other major urban areas, especially Chicago and New York, see Fisher, *Let the People Decide*, 35–42; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 41.

30 Lopp interview (WLC), 5–11; Essie Davis interview (WLC), 2; McClindon, Oral Testimony (BPRM), 1; and for a broader discussion of speed-ups in domestic work, see Jones, *Labor of Love*, 205–7.

31 The figure of 82 percent includes domestic workers in hotels, restaurants, and boarding houses, but this represents a very small percentage compared to the number of women employed in private homes. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 3(1): 122; U.S. Employment Service, *A Report on the Availability of the Services*.

32 In 1930, 34.5 percent of the black female population was gainfully employed compared with 17.4 percent of the white females in Birmingham. Although I have no figures for the number of single-parent, female-headed households, it should be noted that black women outnumbered black men in Birmingham 52,495 to 46,582 (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 1:93). For a discussion of how the depression affected women's work and the response of some male wage earners to the crisis, see Helmbold, "Beyond the Family Economy," and "Downward Occupational Mobility," 169–171; Jones, *Labor of Love*, 221–30.

33 "Statement of Helen Longs, December 30, 1936," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:966; Hudson interview with author; *WW*, June, 1931; for Addie Adkins's occupation, see *Polk's Birmingham City Directory* (1932). The articles by Myra Page, "Water," *WW*, October 1934, and "Leave Them Meters Be!" *WW*, September 1934, were also reprinted in Nekola and Rabinowitz, *Writing Red*, 293–98.

34 *DW*, April 3, 1934.

35 One of the more notorious black social workers in Birmingham was Ida Shepherd. Curtis Maggard claims that a group of angry black women "called [Ida Shepherd] out and almost whooped her naked" (Curtis Maggard interview [WLC], 4). Hosea Hudson, who refers to her as "Hallie Moses" in his narrative, had similar run-ins with Shepherd (Painter, *Narrative*, 161–62).

36 Curtis Maggard interview (WLC), 1–3; also Rosa Jackson interview (WLC), 10; George J. Brown interview (WLC), 3.

37 Painter, *Narrative*, 162–63. For an extended discussion of evasive forms of resistance within the Alabama CP, see Chapter 5.

38 The Scottsboro case is discussed in Chapter 4; see also Dan T. Carter's definitive study of the case, *Scottsboro*.

39 Al Murphy to Nell Painter, March 1978, 1–6, 8–10, NPHH

Collection. Some of his activities as a new recruit are also described in a letter to the YW, December 20, 1930. Although the letter is anonymous, Murphy undoubtedly wrote it since he described himself as the “only young worker” in the Stockham foundry “trying to organize a shop committee.” At the time, Murphy was the only Communist employed at Stockham.

40 Painter, *Narrative*, 2–13, 80, 81–82, 87; Hudson interview with author.

41 Painter, *Narrative*, 77, 99; Mayfield, “Memoirs”; on Andy Brown, who used the pseudonym “Oscar Bryant,” see *Congress View* 2 (April 1944): 2; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Hudson interview with author.

42 James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 188; Painter, *Narrative*, 89–90; Stone interview (SOHP), August 13, 1975, 11; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 258–59.

43 Jarvis interview with author; and on the press coverage of Wirt Taylor's incarceration, see *SW*, August 15, 1933; *Harlem Liberator*, July 22, 1933; *DW*, October 9, 1932, October 9, 1934.

44 Quotation from Jarvis interview with author; Hudson interview with author; and on her marital status, *Polk's Birmingham City Directory* (1934). Burke's description of Leonard's private life and public militancy might be compared with Jacquelyn Dowd Hall's portrait of Trixie Perry in “Disorderly Women,” 373–75.

45 Quotation from *DW*, May 27, 1938; Jarvis interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Stone interview (SOHP), June 27, 1975, 23–24; Durr interview (SOHP), 19–24; Lumpkin interview (SOHP), 14; “Statement of Jane Speed, January 12, 1937,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:961; *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 19, 1933.

46 See, for instance, Elovitz, *A Century of Jewish Life in Dixie*, esp. 54, 101; Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 137–38; Norrell, “Steel Workers and Storekeepers”; Birmingham Historical Society, *Village Creek*, 55. The only Communist of Italian descent was James Giglio, who apparently left the Party within a year after his home had been bombed. The only Jewish activist of the Third Period who joined as an Alabama resident, to my knowledge, was Israel Berlin. For Berlin's background, see Chapter 3.

47 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 19; and for a discussion of North Alabama's voting patterns, see Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, 27; Carmer, *Stars Fell on Alabama*, 59–60. For a broader discussion of white agrarian class consciousness, see Flynt, *Dixie's Forgotten People*, 53, 56, and “Spindle,

Mine, and Mule”; Shugg, *Origins of Class Struggle in Louisiana*, 274–313; and numerous examples in chapters 4 and 7 of Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*.

48 DW, February 9, 1934; SW, February 10, 1934; Clyde Johnson interview with author; quotation from Norman MacCleod, “Agitated Alabama,” *New Masses* 7 (October 1931): 18.

49 SW, November 15, 1930.

50 Quotation from DW, April 3, 1932; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview by H. L. Mitchell, p. 39.

51 Minutes of Meeting of District Bureau—District 17, March 13, 1932, p. 5, Box 7, Draper Papers (Emory); Jim Allen, “Voice from the South,” *Labor Defender* 5, (November 1930): 221.

52 Birmingham News, May 23, June 28, 1930; see also Birmingham News, June 10, 1930; Birmingham *Labor Advocate*, April 26, May 24, 31, 1930. For an excellent discussion of the historical meaning of “social equality” within the context of class, racial, and sexual politics of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, see Painter, “‘Social Equality.’” This issue is also dealt with in Chapter 4.

53 “Testimony of John G. Murphy,” and “Testimony of Lester Shannon,” *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 182, 193, 197–199; “Testimony of Achmed H. Mundo,” *ibid.*, 185–86; “Testimony of Fred McDuff,” *ibid.*, 101–3. Xenophobia and anti-Semitism were common characteristics of Southern anti-Communism, much of which rested on the belief that outside agitators are capable of manipulating the “weak-minded” (mainly blacks). See, for example, Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 113–14; Roebuck and Hickson, *Southern Redneck*, 23, 85; Stephen A. Smith, *Myth, Media, and the Southern Mind*, 30–31; Kelley, “Yankees, Comrades, and Nigger Reds.”

54 BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson, *Black Worker*, 55–57; Painter, *Narrative*, 106–9; New York Times, May 14, 1932; John Williams, “Struggles of the Thirties in the South,” 173–74. In Hudson's notebooks, he recalls that the committee was all black. But his later recollections, and the version by John Williams (which is probably a pseudonym for Hudson) originally published in *Political Affairs*, mention a white member in the delegation. The one white member, Wirt Taylor's father, backed down at the last minute, claiming no part in the event when confronted by police.

In Painter's *Narrative*, Joe Burton is referred to as “Ted Horton.”

55 “Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934),” 2,

Browder Papers, reel 3; S. B. [Ted Wellman], "Unity of Negro and White Toilers"; Jarvis interview with author; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson, *Black Worker*, 57–58; Painter, *Narrative*, 127, 136–37; John Williams, "Struggles of the Thirties in the South," 174. Taylor, who was sentenced to thirteen months on the chain gang, was not released until July of 1933 (SW, August 15, 1933; *Harlem Liberator*, July 22, 1933; DW, October 9, 1932, October 9, 1934).

56 DW, November 25, 28, 29, 30, 1932; Memorandum by R. M. Howell, November 1, 1932, p. 1, and "Summary of Subversive Situation for Month of November, 1932," p. 2, Box 2847, MID Records. The *Daily Worker* reports Mosley as "Alice Moser," but Hudson identified her as the sister of Party activist Archie Mosley (Hudson interview with author).

57 DW, September 16, 1932; R. M. Howell, "Summary of Subversive Situation for Month of September, 1932," Box 2847, MID Records; DW, May 30, 1932; William Z. Foster, *History of the Communist Party*, 291; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 330. Sallye Davis, who later became an organizer for the Southern Negro Youth Congress in the late 1930s and 1940s, recalls the positive response Ford's campaign received from blacks in 1932 (Sallye Davis interview (untranscribed tape), NPHH Collection).

58 "To All Workers and Poor Farmers of the South! (White and Negro)," leaflet, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers.

59 Jimmie Jones to Mrs. Frances E. Burnette, September 29, 1932, JMJ Papers; DW, October 4, 1932.

60 DW, October 6, 10, 1932; Birmingham *Post*, October 10, 1932; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, October 10, 1932; Report by Lt. Ralph E. Hurst to Brigadier General J.C. Persons—"Subject: Communist Agitation," Birmingham, October 19, 1932, p. 3, Drawer 34, Governor Miller Papers; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson interview with author.

61 Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 19; U.S. Congress, House, *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Elections of November 8, 1932*, 2.

62 U.S. Employment Service, *A Report on the Availability of the Services*. The numbers on relief practically equaled the unemployment rate. In 1933, 27.4 percent of Birmingham's black male population was unemployed (Labor Research Association, *Labor Fact Book*, 2:130).

63 "Organize and Struggle for Relief," leaflet, Box 2848, MID

Records; Birmingham *News*, May 1, 2, 1933; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, May 2, 1933; Montgomery *Advertiser*, May 5, 19, 1933; SW, June 10, 1933; Painter, *Narrative*, 142–45; John Williams, “Struggles of the Thirties in the South,” 168; Statement of Jane Speed, January 12, 1937, *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:961–62; BWDS (Notebooks). The two men arrested with Speed were Ned Goodwin and Otis DeBardeleben. Speed, who elected to serve time in jail in lieu of a fine, was charged with disorderly conduct and addressing a racially mixed meeting, and Goodwin, who was badly beaten by police, was charged with assault, sentenced to six months on a chain gang, and required to pay a fine of \$100. DeBardeleben was picked up for having a concealed weapon (Montgomery *Advertiser*, May 19, 20, 26, 1933).

64 Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 64; SW, August 31, September 20, 1933; “Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934),” 1–2, Browder Papers, reel 3.

65 For Birmingham membership figures, see Party Membership Chart D, “Organizational Status of the Party,” (1934), Browder Papers, reel 3. Hosea Hudson estimated that there were six to seven hundred members in Birmingham and about one thousand members in the state of Alabama during this period (Painter, *Narrative*, 114; Hudson interview with author).

CHAPTER TWO

1 Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 8–18; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, chap. 1; Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 112–14; Charles S. Johnson et al., *Collapse of Cotton Tenancy*, 4–5, 46; Woofter, *Landlord and Tenant*, chap. 3; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 5–6.

2 For a more detailed description of cotton tenancy and its historical roots, see Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South*; Jaynes, *Branches without Roots*; Fite, *Cotton Fields No More*, 120–62; Mann, “Slavery, Sharecropping and Sexual Inequality”; and for descriptions of daily life, Allison Davis et al., *Deep South*, 270–327; Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, chap. 4, 42–43, 52–53; Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 11, 90–102; U.S. National Resources Committee, *Farm Tenancy*, 29–32, 33–36.

3 Federal Writers’ Project, *Alabama*, 10; Olive M. Stone, “Agrarian Conflict in Alabama,” 15–21; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 3(1): 91.

4 Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 156–58; Allison Davis et al., *Deep South*, 270–71, 325–27; Garner interview (WLC), 7–9; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 187–97.

5 For a vivid description of women's work patterns in the cotton South, see Minnie Brown, "Black Women in American Agriculture"; Elaine Ellis, "Women of the Cotton Fields," 333, 342; Mann, "Slavery, Sharecropping and Sexual Inequality," 778–85; Ruth Allen, *The Labor of Women*; Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation*, 115; Jones, *Labor of Love*, 81–99, 200–220; Ware, *Holding Their Own*, 11–13. On wage differentials in rural Alabama, see SW, March–April 1935, May 1935; DW, May 8, June 21, 1935; "To All White and Negro Share Croppers and Tenants and Farm Workers: To All White and Negro Farm Women and Youth," n.d., encl., Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 66. In 1931, sharecroppers in Tallapoosa County reported that women received one pound of butter and an occasional dime, per week, for taking in laundry (*Liberator*, October 25, 1931).

6 DW, July 6, 1934; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Lemon Johnson interview with author. Both Jacqueline Jones and Susan Mann, on the other hand, generalize that black and white women rarely took part in controlling farm finances (Jones, "'Tore Up and a-Movin,'" 19; Mann, "Slavery, Sharecropping and Sexual Inequality," 787).

7 Clyde Johnson interview by H. L. Mitchell, 45; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 280; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census, 1940: Population*, 2(1): 223; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 236; quotation from WW, October 1934; and for a similar example, Lera Maggard interview (WLC), 3. Most rural black families encouraged girls to attend school while boys were often discouraged since it would have meant a loss of labor (Jones, *Labor of Love*, 91, 96–98; Brock, "Farmer's Daughter Effect," 18–19).

8 For a theoretical discussion of these forms, see James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, esp. chaps. 2 and 8; Naison, "Black Agrarian Radicalism"; and for a brilliant example from South African historiography, see Bradford, *A Taste of Freedom*, 49–51. Most scholarly examples of black rural resistance still focus on slavery, ignoring the rich history of these practices in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Examples abound in early secondary sources and firsthand accounts, though rarely do these writers describe such action as resistance. See, for instance, Bizzell, "Farm Tenantry in the United States," 267–68; Baker, *Following the Color Line*, 76–77; Sisk, "Alabama

Black Belt,” 277–87. For twentieth century accounts suggesting that these practices were indeed oppositional, see Allison Davis et al. *Deep South*, 396–98; Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 174–74. On the trickster tradition, see Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 121–33; Joyner, *Down by the Riverside*, 177; and for an excellent discussion of slaves’ use of the dominant ideology to redefine the boundaries of paternalism through theft, see Alex Lichtenstein, “That Disposition To Theft.”

9 Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 12–18; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 53–54; Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 183–224; Campbell and Johnson, *Black Migration in America*, 72–76; Higgs, “The Boll Weevil.” For example, in Macon County, the number of wage workers declined from 1,720 in 1929 to 1,368 in 1931; in Lowndes County it dropped from 1,627 to 1,294, and Dallas County experienced a decline from 2,411 in 1929 to 1,918 in 1931 (Alabama Department of Labor, *Annual Report*, 1937, 41). On the impact of the automobile in the rural South, see U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Agriculture*, 2(2): Table 23; Raper, *Preface to Peasantry*, 117–18; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 55–56; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 149.

10 “Draft Program for Negro Farmers in the Southern States,” *Communist* 9 (March 1930): 253, 254–55; “Draft Program for the Negro Laborers in the Southern States,” *Communist* 9 (March 1930): 246–50; Jim Allen, “Some Rural Aspects of the Struggle for the Right of Self-Determination,” *Communist* 10 (March 1931): 254–55; Tom Johnson to J. Schmies, May 10, 1930, *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 108; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 62.

11 “Farmers of South Fight Starvation! Appeal By Communist Party,” leaflet, ca. January 1931, Drawer 50, Governor Miller Papers; see also SW, January 24, 1931; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 93.

12 SW, March 7, 21, 1931.

13 Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 137; SW, March 7, 1931. Referring to “Eugene Braxton,” the *Southern Worker* reported he was in Alberta, Alabama. James Allen later recalls that “Braxton” was in Camp Hill (“Communism in the Deep South,” 95–96), and Herndon's own account, *Let Me Live*, mentions a “Camden County” (p. 129). However, Camden is actually the name of a town in Wilcox County. I have determined the actual name of the county by using evidence in Herndon's account, in which he cites a newspaper article stating that he was in Governor Benjamin M. Miller's hometown. Miller was born in Wilcox County, near Oak Hill (Marks, *Who Was Who in Alabama*, 121).

14 SW, March 14, June 27, 1931; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 95.

15 Olive M. Stone, "Agrarian Conflict in Alabama," 73–78; Federal Writers' Project, *Alabama*, 10; Philliou, "Organizing for the Right to Live," 2; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 19; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 3(1): 91, 94; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Agriculture*, 2(2): 709; Ellis, "Women of the Cotton Fields," 342; Preece, "Epic of the Black Belt," 75; *Liberator*, October 17, 1931; WW, June 1931. On the Grays' role, see letters in SW, January 31, February 28, 1931; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 398; Henry Puro, "The Tasks of Our Party in Agrarian Work," *Communist* 10 (February 1931): 148; Painter, *Narrative*, 84; Philliou, "Organizing for the Right to Live," 27.

16 Quoted in James S. Allen, *Reconstruction*, 124; Olive Matthews Stone, "Ralph and Tommy Gray of Tallapoosa," typescript, ca. 1970, pp. 1–2, Box 2, Stone Collection. Although Allen was not sure if Alfred Gray was related to Tommy and Ralph, Stone's research reveals that he was indeed their paternal grandfather.

17 ILD Press Service, "The Fight of the Alabama Share Croppers: An Interview with the Niece of Ralph Gray," by Sasha Small, April 21, 1934, CJP, reel 13; [Tommy Gray], "Brother Ralph Gray's Story," 21; SW, June 27, 1931. Langley was a descendant of an established, well-respected antebellum family (Tallapoosa County Bicentennial Committee, *Tallapoosa County*, 131).

18 SW, March 21, 1931; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 31; Painter, *Narrative*, 84; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 398; Hudson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author; "Testimony of Leonard Patterson," in State of Louisiana, *Subversion in Racial Unrest*, 121.

19 James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 96, 100–101; quotation from SW, May 16, July 25, 1931; DW, July 18, 1931; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 32.

20 SW, July 25, 1931; DW, August 11, 1931.

21 SW, July 25, August 29, 1931; Harris Gilbert [Harry Simms], "Report on Situation in Camp Hill, Alabama," mimeo, ca. September 1931, p. 2, Box 12, Minor Papers; *Liberator*, December 19, 1931; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 96; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 33.

22 There are numerous conflicting accounts of the Camp Hill shoot-out. See DW, July 18, 1931; SW, July 25, 1931; YW, July 27, 1931; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, July 17, 18, 20, 1931; Dadeville *Spotcash*, July 23, 1931; *Liberator*, July 25, 1931; James S. Allen, "Communism

in the Deep South,” 96–97; B. D. Amis, “Croppers in Southern States Fight to Live,” *International Press Correspondence*, August 20, 1931, p. 821; Henry Fuller, “Sunday at Camp Hill,” *New Republic* 99 (1931): 132–34; James D. Burton, “Racial Disturbance in Tallapoosa County, Alabama,” mimeo, 1931, p. 3, Box 23, CIC Collection; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, 294–95; Lowell Wakefield, “It Was War in the South,” *Labor Defender* 8 (February 1932): 32; William Nowell, “Why Camp Hill?” *Labor Defender* 6 (September 1931): 167; [Tommy Gray], “Brother Ralph Gray's Story,” 21; Rosen, “The Alabama Share Croppers Union,” 33–35; Philliou, “Organizing for the Right to Live,” 31–32; Solomon, “Red and Black,” 424–27; Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 228–29; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 124–25.

23 Quotation from [Tommy Gray], “Brother Ralph Gray's Story,” 21; *DW*, July 18, 19, 1931; *SW*, August 8, 1931; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 97. According to Sheriff Young, Gray was still alive when they arrested him and died en route to jail (Dadeville *Spotcash*, July 23, 1931).

24 It is difficult to determine precisely how many people were arrested by Tallapoosa County authorities. Initially, official Party sources and the mainstream press reported twenty-nine arrests, but a few days later most newspapers boosted this figure to thirty-four. Both the *Daily Worker* (August 14, 1931) and the *Young Worker* (August 3, 1931) each reported fifty-five jailed and a host of others missing. James S. Allen, however, states that there were only twenty-nine jailed in the aftermath of Camp Hill (“Communism in the Deep South,” 98), and Dale Rosen has estimated thirty-five prisoners (“The Alabama Share Croppers’ Union,” 36). The series of articles published in the *Labor Defender* concerning the Camp Hill shootout cite the standard number of thirty-four.

25 *DW*, August 6, 1931; *YW*, August 3, 1931; Dadeville *Spotcash*, July 23, 1931; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 98; Philliou, “Organizing for the Right to Live,” 33; W. G. Porter, Secretary of Montgomery Branch, NAACP, to Mr. Andrews, July 17, 1931, and Earle Saffols to William Pickens, July 24, 1931, Box G-6, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; quotation from Gilbert [Harry Simms], “Report on Situation in Camp Hill, Alabama,” 1, Minor Papers; *New York Times*, July 19, 1931; *Chattanooga News*, July 20, 1931; Dadeville *Spotcash*, July 23, 1931; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Beecher, “The Share Croppers’ Union,” 125; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 125–27; Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 229; *Liberator*, October 17, November 14, 1931.

26 W. G. Porter, Secretary of Montgomery Branch, NAACP, to Mr.

Andrews, July 17, 1931, Box G-6, NAACP Papers, Branch Files. A few writers blamed the entire confrontation on the Scottsboro case. See "Alabama's Race War," *Literary Digest* 110 (August 1, 1931): 7–8; *Chattanooga Times*, July 18, 1931.

27 *Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 18, 1931; Earle Saffols to William Pickens, July 24, 1931, Box G-6, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 126; Philliou, "Organizing for the Right to Live," 35–37. Ned Cobb was also aware of these rumors. After the shoot-out at Camp Hill, he later recalled, "I heard talk about trucks comin into this country deliverin guns to colored people. . . . But didn't no trucks haul guns to nobody" (Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 311).

28 *Birmingham Reporter*, July 25, August 1, 1931; *Birmingham News*, July 18, 1931; *Labor Advocate*, July 25, 1931; Burton, "Racial Disturbance in Tallapoosa County, Alabama," 1–3, CIC Collection; Haynes, "Communists Are Bidding for Negro Loyalty," 155; see also Carter, *Scottsboro*, 127; *Pittsburgh Courier*, July 25, August 1, 1931.

29 Haynes, "Communists are Bidding for Negro Loyalty," 155; *Liberator*, October 17, 1931; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 127; quotation from L. N. Duncan to Governor B. M. Miller, July 20, 1931; see also Bradford Knapp, president of Alabama Polytechnic Institute to Governor B. M. Miller, July 21, 1931, both in Drawer 50, Governor Miller Papers; Walter White to Dr. Will W. Alexander, July 20, 1931, Box 23, CIC Collection. It is unlikely that any such minute books existed since the union's own secretary could neither read nor write. Moreover, Wilson and county solicitor Sanford Mullins refused to release any of the confiscated documents. For the actions of Wilson and Mullins, see Carter, *Scottsboro*, 127.

30 Quotation from Walter White to Roderick Beddow, July 30, 1931, Box 23, CIC Collection; *DW*, July 28 and 30, August 1, 2, 1931; *SW*, August 1, 8, 1931; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 100; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, July 29, 1931; *DW*, August 6, 1931; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 129.

31 *SW*, August 8, 1931; "Draft Resolution on Negro Work," typewritten, ca. 1931, Box 12, Minor Papers; Beecher, "The Share Croppers' Union," 124; William Nowell, "Why Camp Hill?" *Labor Defender* 6 (September 1931): 167; and on conditions in Tallapoosa County, see Gilbert [Harry Simms], "Report on Situation in Camp Hill, Alabama," 1, Minor Papers.

32 Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, encl., "In Memory of Ralph Gray," STFU Papers, reel 1.

33 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Gilbert [Harry Simms], "Report on Situation in Camp Hill, Alabama," 2, Minor Papers.

34 ILD Press Service, "The Fight of the Alabama Sharecroppers: An Interview with the Niece of Ralph Gray," by Sasha Small, April 21, 1934, CJP, reel 13; Al Murphy to Nell Painter, March, 1978, p. 14, NPHH Collection; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 106; *DW*, December 31, 1932; quotation from Jim Allen [Harry Wicks] to Jim Randolph [William Weinstone], March 19, 1932, Box 7, Draper Papers (Emory).

35 Although Murphy remembers having been appointed secretary of the SCU in 1931, evidence from Simms's and Wicks's correspondence, as well as Eula Gray's account, indicates that the union had no permanent secretary until the spring of 1932. Moreover, Nat Ross did not arrive in Birmingham until the early part of 1932 (Gilbert [Harry Simms], "Report on Situation in Camp Hill, Alabama," 2, Minor Papers; Jim Allen [Harry Wicks] to Jim Randolph [William Weinstone], March 19, 1932, Box 7, Draper Papers [Emory]). For Murphy's account, Murphy to Painter, March 1978, pp. 12–13, NPHH Collection; "Questions for Al Murphy (Al Jackson), Former Organizer of the SCU," questionnaire, ca. 1975), Box 2, Stone Collection.

36 On James and Capitola Tasker, see *DW*, July 25, 1934; *WW*, September 1934; Bloor, *We Are Many*, 256 (in the *Daily Worker* Capitola Tasker is listed as Equile McKeithen, undoubtedly to protect her identity); Clyde Johnson interview with author; and on John Beans, see Hudson interview with author; Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism*, 183.

37 Quotation from *SW*, February 11, 1931; "To All Captains of the Share Croppers' Union Locals," unsigned memo, Birmingham, Ala., August 10, 1932, Box 2848, MID Records; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 322; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 401–2; Lemon Johnson interview with author.

38 Lemon Johnson interview with author; "To All Captains of the Share Croppers' Union Locals," MID Records; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 313; "Excerpts from *Washington Daily News*," typescript, n.d., STFU Papers, reel 1.

39 Grace Lumpkin, *A Sign for Cain*, 223. It should be noted that Lumpkin had attended one or two SCU meetings (Lumpkin interview [SOHP], 15–16). Ruby Weems, "The Murder of Ralph Gray," *Liberator*, November 21, 1931; V. J. Jerome, "To a Black Man," *DW*, December 3, 1932. Other examples include Cyril Briggs, "Negro Revolutionary Hero—Toussaint L'Ouverture," *Communist* 8 (May 1929): 250–54; Eugene Gordon, "Alabama Massacre," *New Masses* 7 (August 1931): 16; and Gilbert Lewis, "Revolutionary Negro Tradition," *Negro Worker*, March 15, 1930.

40 Quotation from “Excerpts from *Washington Daily News*” typescript, n.d., STFU Papers, reel 1; WW, November 1935; Lemon Johnson interview with author; Smith interview with author. On black women's social and religious networks, see Perry, “A Day with Becky Clayton,” 165; White, *Ar'nt I a Woman*, 123; Jean E. Friedman, “Women's History,” 6–9; Jones, *Labor of Love*, 67–68, 102. The role of “workers correspondence” is treated further in Chapter 5.

41 My analysis here is drawn mainly from Kaplan, “Female Consciousness.”

42 DW, May 10, June 21, 1934; WW, September 1934.

43 See, for example, Israel Amter's comments in WW, February 1930, and Sadie Van Veen, “Negro Women and the Elections,” WW, September 1931. For a discussion of the Party's male-centered vision of the “proletariat,” see Rabinowitz, “Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism”; and Joan W. Scott, “On Language, Gender, and Working-Class History,” esp. 10–11, for a broader treatment of how working-class movements have constructed a concept of class that excludes women.

44 Murphy to Painter, March 1978, p. 22, NPHH Collection; [Al Murphy], Report to Central Committee of CPUSA, June 10, 1933, p. 1, Box 16, Draper Papers (Emory); Lemon Johnson interview with author; DW, March 8, 1933, June 11, July 7, 1934. In 1932 the Party unsuccessfully attempted to organize a separate Tenants' League for white sharecroppers (Murphy, “Negro Share Croppers Build Their Union,” 16; Bunche, “The Share-Croppers,” 214).

45 After the Reeltown shoot-out (see below) at least one white farmer reportedly gave refuge to an SCU member. Birmingham *Age-Herald*, December 22, 1932; New York *Sun*, February 23, 1933; DW, December 24, 1932.

46 DW, December 24, 1932; Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 19. Quotation from Frank Ellis to Hugo Black, April 8, 1932; see also C. C. Prichard to Hugo Black, June 18, 1932, Hugo Black to Frank Ellis, April 25, 1932, all in Box 94, Black Papers.

47 Quotation from Durr interview (SOHP), 24; Al Murphy to Nell Painter, March 1978, p. 21, NPHH Collection; Stone interview (SOHP), August 13, 1975, pp. 8–10, 15, 18, 20; “Questions for Al Murphy (Al Jackson), Former Organizer of SCU,” questionnaire, ca. 1975, Box 2, Stone Collection.

48 DW, September 9, 29, 1932; *Liberator*, October 15, 1932; Solomon, “Red and Black,” 434; Rosen, “The Alabama Share Croppers' Union,” 40.

49 DW, December 31, 1932.

50 Montgomery *Advertiser*, December 28, 1932; DW, December 29, 1932; Philliou, "Organizing for the Right to Live," 42; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 42–44; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 301–2.

51 "Report on Agrarian Work in the South to Meeting of the Negro Department, January 18," mimeo, February 3, 1932, p. 8, Box 12, Minor Papers; quotation from Montgomery *Advertiser*, December 28, 1932; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 45; W. S. Parker to "My Good Colored Customers," December 29, 1932, CJP, reel 13; Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 146; DW, December 21, 1932; R. M. Howell, "Report on the Subversive Situation in Birmingham, Alabama," December 1932, p. 1, Box 2847, MID Records.

52 DW, December 21, 22, 31, 1932; *Harlem Liberator*, July 29, 1933; SW, May 20, 1933; Montgomery *Advertiser*, December 22, 24, 1932; Dadeville *Record*, December 22, 1932; Birmingham *Post*, December 22, 1932; Birmingham *News*, December 20, 21, 1932; Tuskegee *News*, December 22, 1932; "What Happened in Tallapoosa County," *Labor Defender* 9 (February 1933): 4; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, December 24, 1932; Painter, *Narrative*, 146–48; Beecher, "The Share Croppers' Union," 127–31; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 321–29; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, 295–96; Jamss S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 104; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 42–48; Philliou, "Organizing for the Right to Live," 43–45; Solomon, "Red and Black," 434–40; Rosen and Rosengarten, "Shoot-Out at Reeltown."

53 Quotation from Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 329.

54 Those indicted for "intent to murder" were Sam Moss, Clinton Moss, Ned Cobb, Cornelius Wood, Edgar Wood, Alf White, Jug Moss, Judson Simpson, Scott Gray, Roy Gray, Bully Warren, Will Warren, Hunker Simpson, Thomas Moss. Sam Simpson, Willie Anderson, John Warren, Sam Cobb, and Merge Wood (State of Alabama, Tallapoosa County, Circuit Court, Spring 1933, Richard H. Powell, Jr., Fifth Judicial Circuit, *Indictment by Grand Jury*, CJP, reel 13.) Ivy Moss was also arrested, but because he allegedly died of pneumonia less than a week after he was released on bail, he was not indicted (Press Release, *Crusader News Agency*, January 14, 1933, CJP, reel 13).

55 Quotation from R. M. Howell, "Report on the Subversive Situation in Birmingham, Alabama," December 1932, p. 2, Box 2847, MID Records; Birmingham *Age-Herald*, December 20, 1932; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 176; DW, January 21, 1933; Baltimore *Afro-American*,

January 21, 1933; Beecher, "The Share Croppers' Union," 131.

56 Quotation from *DW*, December 29, 1932; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers Union," 49; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 104; Painter, *Narrative*, 148; Solomon, "Red and Black," 438–40. Tuskegee superintendent Robert Moton claimed that James surrendered while receiving treatment and requested that school authorities notify the Macon County sheriff since he "preferred being placed in the Macon County jail" (Robert Moton to Phillips Bradley, January 24, 1933, CJP, reel 13).

57 *DW*, December 22, 24, 26, 27, 31, 1932; *Birmingham News*, December 22, 1932; R. M. Howell, "Report on the Subversive Situation in Birmingham, Alabama," December 1932, p. 2, Box 2847, MID Records; *DW*, December 29, 1932, January 4, 5, 9, 1933; *Savannah Tribune*, January 12, 1933; Painter, *Narrative*, 151–54; BWDS (Notebooks); Murphy to Painter, March 1978, p. 27, NPHH Collection.

58 Abbie Elmore Bugg to Robert Moton, February 25, 1933, and William McArthur to Dr. Morten [sic], January 1933, CJP, reel 13; *DW*, December 24, 27, 1932; Nathan Solomon, National Student League, to Robert Moton, January 9, 1932, and Herbert C. Herring to Robert Moton, January 7, 1933, CJP, reel 13; Painter, *Narrative*, 148; Robert Moton to Hubert C. Herring, January 21, 1933, T. M. Campbell to Leon Harris, February 27, 1932, and Monroe Work to James D. Morris, January 3, 1933, CJP, reel 13.

59 *Birmingham Post*, December 22, 1932. See also *Montgomery Advertiser*, December 22, 27, 1932; Jackson County *Sentinel*, April 13, 1933; CIC Press Release, December 20, 1932, CJP, reel 13. For a more detailed discussion of the local press response to the events, see Kelley, "Hammer n' Hoe," 263–64.

60 Quoted in CIC Press Release, December 20, 1932, CJP, reel 13; Reverend M. Nunn to Governor B. M. Miller, January 9, 1933, Drawer 34, Governor Miller Papers; Murphy to Painter, March 1978, p. 21, NPHH Collection.

61 *DW*, January 11, 1933; *Crusader News Agency*, press release, January 21, 1933; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 178; State of Alabama, Tallapoosa County, Circuit Court, Spring 1933, Richard H. Powell, Jr., Fifth Judicial Circuit, *Indictment by Grand Jury*, CJP, reel 13; *Montgomery Advertiser*, April 27, 1933; *DW*, April 27, May 2, 1933; *Macon Telegraph*, April 28, 1933; *Harlem Liberator*, May 6, 1933.

62 [Al Murphy], Report to Central Committee of CPUSA, June 10, 1933, p. 1, Box 16, Draper Papers (Emory). The published version of this report claimed two to three thousand members ([Al Murphy],

“Agrarian Work,” 80). The enthusiastic support for the SCU following the shoot-out is described in *Birmingham World*, January 10, 1933; and Beecher, “The Share Croppers’ Union,” 127.

63 Lawrence Gellert, “Negro Songs of Protest,” *New Masses* 8 (May 1933): 15–16.

64 Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 91–109; Wright, *Old South, New South*, 227–28; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, esp. 21–22; Conrad, *Forgotten Farmers*, 43–50, 64–67; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 60–61.

65 Wright, *Old South, New South*, 228–35; Mertz, *New Deal Policy*, 29–30; Daniel, *Breaking the Land*, 169–74; Jack Temple Kirby, *Rural Worlds Lost*, 71–72; Whately, “Labor for the Picking.”

66 *DW*, October 4, December 22, 1933; Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934), 3, Browder Papers, reel 3; Murphy, “The Share Croppers’ Union Grows and Fights,” 45, 47; *DW*, July 7, 1934; ILD Press Service, “The Fight of the Alabama Sharecroppers: An Interview with the Niece of Ralph Gray,” by Sasha Small, April 21, 1934, CJP, reel 13; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, 297; quotation from *DW*, June 7, 1934.

67 *DW*, April 5, July 7, 1934; Murphy, “The Share Croppers’ Union Grows and Fights,” 46.

68 *DW*, August 27, September 6, 18, 27, October 1, 18, 1934; *Savannah Tribune*, October 18, 1934; “Against the Negro People: Alabama,” *Labor Defender* 11 (January 1935): 5.

69 *Montgomery Journal*, August 28, 1934; *Birmingham News*, October 22, 1934; *DW*, August 27, 1934.

70 *Savannah Tribune*, October 18, 1934; *SW*, October 1934; *DW*, October 4, 18, 1934.

71 *DW*, December 8, 1934; Rosen, “The Alabama Share Croppers’ Union,” 65; Murphy, “The Share Croppers’ Union Grows and Fights,” 46; *SW*, August 15, 1933; Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934), 5, Browder Papers, reel 3.

CHAPTER THREE

1 Douglas L. Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 17–18; Bailey, “Ten Trying Years,” 49; Benson interview (WLC), 15; Andrews interview (WLC), 20–21; Chandler interview (WLC), 3–4; Willie Johnson interview (WLC), 10; Burns interview (WLC), 1.

2 Battle interview (BPRM), 1–3; George Brown interview (BPRM), 1–2; Boddie and Wright interview (WLC), 3; George Brown interview (WLC), 6–7; Bryant interview (WLC), 2; Darden interview (WLC), 1; Gibson interview (WLC), 8; Esther Lowell, “Housing for Negro Employees, United States Steel Corporation,” *Opportunity* 7 (August 1929): 247–48; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 57–58; see also Chapter 1. According to a report by the secretary of the Alabama State Federation of Labor in 1930, about 65 percent of the miners and 85 percent of the textile workers in Alabama lived in company-owned homes (“What Caused the Southern Uprising,” *American Federationist* 37 [January 1930]: 28).

3 Leighton, *Five Cities*, 117; Birmingham Historical Society, *Village Creek*, 71; quotation from Earl Brown interview (WLC), 9; C. S. Johnson interview (WLC), 18–20; Jones interview (WLC), 8; Hudson interview with author; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 43–45; Mayfield, “Memoirs,” 51–52; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 19–20; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 69–72; Huntley, “Iron Ore Miners,” 32–33.

4 “What Caused the Southern Uprising,” *American Federationist* 37 (January 1930): 28; Averhart interview (WLC), 24; Mayfield, “Memoirs,” 51; Battle interview (BPRM); Darden interview (WLC), 1; Willie Johnson interview (WLC), 11; Garner interview (WLC), 4; Harris interview (WLC), 8–9; see also Gaventa, *Power and Powerlessness*, 89–90.

5 Bailey, “Ten Trying Years,” 51; quotation from Burns interview (WLC), 5, 8–11; Darden interview (WLC), 1; Gibson interview (WLC), 6; Harris interview (WLC), 21–22; Willie Johnson interview (WLC), 4; see also Chapter 1. There were a few instances of sexual exploitation of black women: occasionally shack rousters raped the wives or daughters of miners. When black men protested these slave-cabin-style rapes, “they were either beaten almost to death or shot down like a dog” (quoted in Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 70).

6 My analysis here is drawn from Morton, “A Woman's Work Is Never Done”; Paul A. Smith, “Domestic Labour and Marx's Theory of Value”; Blumenfeld and Mann, “Domestic Labour and the Reproduction of Labour Power”; Gerstein, “Domestic Work and Capitalism”; Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women*, chaps. 5 and 10.

7 “How to Solve the Problem,” *American Federationist* 37 (January 1930): 33–40; William Green, “Editorial,” *American Federationist* 37 (February 1930): 147; *Textile Worker*, June 1930; *Labor Banner*, June

14, 1930; quotation from Paul Smith, "Southern Organizing Campaign," *American Federationist* 37 (April 1930): 408–9; *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 178–79.

8 Both attempts were initiated by black YCL activists. Following a 10 percent wage cut, an unidentified YCL member led an aborted strike of black employees at McGough Bakery. In the laundry industry in 1931 a black female YCL organizer briefly outlined her attempts to create a union in a letter to the YW, but no other evidence is available. Nonetheless, a laundry workers' union did come into being two years later with the passage of the NIRA (see below) (*SW*, June 20, 1931; Memorandum by F. D. Pryor, (Acting) Director of Naval Intelligence to Officer-in-Charge, U.S. Naval Recruiting Office, Birmingham, Ala., April 18, 1934, Box 2848, MID Records; YW, October 19, 1931).

9 *DW*, July 14, 1930; "Testimony of Fred McDuff," *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 97–99; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 96–97, 100–2; "Confidential Report on Communist Activities," (1930), p. 2, Box 88, *National Republic* Files. The NMU experienced a modicum of success in Harlan, Kentucky, during the coal strike of 1931–32. See James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 80–84; Draper, "Communists and Miners," 382–87; Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?* 56–84; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 45–47.

Although the CP maintained a policy of "dual unionism" until the TUUL was disbanded in 1935, Alabama Communists discarded it as early as 1933. Dual unionism meant organizing separate unions along industrial lines in opposition to the AFL's craft unions (*Labor Unity*, February 1935; *DW*, March 11, 18, 1935; Jack Stachel, "Our Trade Union Policy," *Communist* 14 [November 1934]: 1093–1101; William Z. Foster, "Breakthrough in Industrial Organization," *Political Affairs* 48 [September-October 1969]: 67–68; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 132–34; Kling, "Making the Revolution," 305–6).

10 Jim Allen [Harry Wicks] to "Jim Randolph" [William Weinstone], March 19, 1932, Box 7, Draper Papers (Emory); Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 88–90; *SW*, October 10, 1931, August 15, 1933; E. S., "Questions of Shop Work in Birmingham," *Party Organizer* 6 (July 1933): 17–18; *ACLU Weekly Bulletin* 594 (January 5, 1934): 1; quoted in *Birmingham Post*, September 19, 1933.

11 *Birmingham News*, August 13, September 1, 1933; *Labor Advocate*, July 15, September 22, 1933; *Birmingham Post*, July 24, 1933; Mitch interview (WLC), 2–3; Gibson interview (WLC), 8; *Birmingham News*, August 4, 1933; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 84–89; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 71; *Birmingham News*, October 4, 9, 13, 15,

1933; Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 143.

12 DW, December 2, 1933, June 23, March 1, April 14, May 22, 1934; Labor Research Association, *Labor Fact Book*, 2:43–71; Browder, *The New Deal*, and *What the People Should Know about the NRA*; Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934), p. 2, Browder Papers, reel 3; Ross, “The NRA in the South,” 1179–82; Foner, *Organized Labor and the Black Worker*, 200–203. For a fascinating overview of early New Deal labor policy, see Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy*, 73–134.

13 Earl Browder, “Why an Open Letter to Our Party Membership,” *Communist* 12 (August 1933): 707–15; Central Committee, CPUSA, *An Open Letter to All Members*; Painter, *Narrative*, 184–86; Ross, “Some Problems of the Class Struggle,” 68–69; SW, August 15, 31, September 20, November 15, 1933.

14 Party Membership Chart A, “The Party in the Factories,” Browder Papers, reel 3. The official figures for 1934 are from Party Membership Chart D, “Organizational Status of the Party,” Browder Papers, reel 3. But these figures were submitted by the various section committees and do not reflect the district’s total dues-paying membership at the time.

15 Ross, “Utilize the Rising Militancy,” 19–20, and “Some Problems of the Class Struggle,” 68–69; SW, August 31, September 20, 1933; Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934), p. 2–3, Browder Papers, reel 3; DW, February 9, 1934; SW, February 10, 1934; Statement of Israel Berlin, January 9, 1937, *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 15(C): 6315.

16 “Report from Memphis, Tennessee, June, 1933: Extract,” Box 2848, MID Records; Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, December 15, 1933; DW, February 1, 1944; Clyde Johnson interview with author. Johnson’s replacement in Atlanta was Hosea Hudson.

17 Gibson interview (WLC), 8–10 (section CK-10), and 3–4 (section CK-11A); Willie Johnson interview (WLC), 21; Burns interview (WLC), 8–11; Mitch, interview (WLC), 5; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 47.

18 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 3(1): 114; Lewis, *Black Coal Miners*, 47; Paul David Richards, “Racism in the Southern Coal Industry,” 42–48; Burns interview (WLC), 8–11; C. S. Johnson interview (WLC), 23.

19 Myra Page, “Alabama Miners Smash the Color Line,” *New Masses* 11 (May 8, 1934): 17; quote from Page article in DW, April 13, 1934; Clyde Johnson to author, April 10, 1989. Cayton and Mitchell estimated that in 1934, approximately 60 percent of the UMWA in Alabama was black (Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New*

Unions, 323).

20 Alabama Mining Institute, "Confidential Memorandum re: Alabama Coal Industry," n.d., Drawer 108, Governor Graves Papers; *UMWJ*, May 1, 1934; *Birmingham News*, April 9, 1934; *DW*, March 10, 1934; *SW*, March 25, 1934; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 83–84, 88–89; Mallory [Elizabeth Lawson], "Class War in Alabama," 107. "Jim Mallory" was Elizabeth Lawson's pen name while she edited the *Southern Worker* from 1933 to 1936 (James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 189).

21 *UMWJ*, May 1, 1934; *Birmingham News*, April 9, 1934; Ross, "The Communist Party in the Birmingham Strikes," 690–92; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 89–91; Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 144–45, 149; Vittoz, *New Deal Labor Policy*, 110–11; *DW*, April 16, 17, 1934, May 29, 1934; Mallory [Elizabeth Lawson], "Class War in Alabama," 106; Katherine Lumpkin, *The South in Progress*, 120; *Birmingham Post*, April 28, 1934.

22 Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners," 26; Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions*, 324; Lemley interview (BPRM), 5.

23 Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners," 48–49, 51, 55; Averhart interview (WLC), 24; Benson interview (WLC), 11; Rikard, "An Experiment in Welfare Capitalism," 270–79.

24 Mine Mill organizer quoted in *DW*, May 29, 1934, May 26, October 27, November 10, December 29, 1934; Marge Frantz interview with author; Hudson interview with author; BWDS (Notebooks); Clyde Johnson interview with author; resolution quoted in *Birmingham Age-Herald*, June 5, 1934; *DW*, October 20, 1934.

25 *DW*, April 20, May 29, June 9, 23, 1934; Grace interview (WLC), 5; Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners," 59; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 111.

26 *DW*, May 29, June 9, 23, July 21, August 11, 1934; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview by H. L. Mitchell, pp. 34–35. Efforts to obtain relief in Bessemer during the strike were complicated by the fact that the director of relief was married to TCI labor agent A. D. Maddox.

27 *Birmingham Age-Herald*, June 28, 1934; *DW*, July 3, September 1, October 27, 1934; Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners," 69; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 112–13; Furse, "History of Mine Mill," 12; *DW*, August 25, 1934; "A Call to Action!" handbill, ca. 1935, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers.

28 *DW*, April 26, 30, 1934; Northrup, "The Negro and Unionism in Birmingham," 34; Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions*, 324–25; *DW*, March 12, 30, 1935.

29 Northrup, "The Negro and Unionism in Birmingham," 33–34; Cayton and Mitchell, *Black Workers and the New Unions*, 324–25, 332–35, 339, 358–59; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 98–100; Birmingham News, June 23, 1934; DW, June 18, 19, 20, 26, 27, 1934; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 3(1): 114; Norrell, "Caste in Steel," 676.

30 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Northrup, "The Negro and Unionism in Birmingham," 33–34; DW, March 27, 1935.

31 Mayfield, "Memoirs," 53; quoted in Myra Page, "Alabama Miners Smash the Color Line," *New Masses* 11 (May 8, 1934): 16 (emphasis in original); Hudson interview with author; Grace interview (WLC), 12; Burns interview (WLC), 13.

32 Birmingham News, February 5, 11, 13, 14, 24, 1934; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 72–73, 78–80; DW, June 8, 1934; Painter, *Narrative*, 222; John Howard Lawson, "In Dixieland," 9; Kendrick, "Alabama Goes on Strike," 233; Birmingham News, July 16, 17, 24, 27, 29, August 1, 6, 7, 8, 12, 1934; Hodges, *New Deal Labor Policy*, 96–98; Nelson, *Workers on the Waterfront*, 127–155; Alabama, Department of Labor, *Annual Report, 1938*, p. 32.

33 Quoted in DW, December 31, 1934. In 1935, white league members reportedly stormed the Tarrant City jail and freed black Communist Lanny Walters after he had been arrested for addressing an interracial meeting (SW, May 1935; YW, February 12, 1935).

34 R. M. Howell, "Summary of Subversive Situation for Month of May, 1933," p. 1, "Summary of Subversive Situation for Month of June, 1933," p. 1. Box 2848, MID Records; DW, March 6, 1934; YW, March 27, 1934. R. M. Howell of the U.S. Military Intelligence Division in Birmingham reported that "Communist agitation among the colored population of this city has developed to such an extent that the social workers here informed me that it will be difficult to get the full quota from this race for the Civilian Conservation Corps" (Howell, "Summary of the Subversive Situation for the Month of June," p. 1). For descriptions of Southern CCC camps, see Salmond, "The Civilian Conservation Corps and the Negro"; Dubay, "The Civilian Conservation Corps."

35 Ross, "Some Problems of the Class Struggle," 65; Clyde Johnson to author, April 10, 1934; DW, June 8, August 4, 1934.

36 SW, August 22, 1934; DW, October 4, 8, 10, 17, 19, 24, 1934.

37 DW, May 19, 1934; Birmingham News, May 9, 10, 1934.

38 Jack Conroy's visit is dealt with in Chapter 6. On Page and Lumpkin, see *DW*, April 13, 1934; Frederickson, "Myra Page"; Markey [Myra Page] interview (SOHP), 108–115; Lumpkin interview (SOHP), esp. 15–16. For Weller's story, see "Statement of Paul Weller, January 26, 1937," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 15(C): 6319–20.

39 *DW*, April 17, 24, May 2, 3, 1934; *New York Post*, May 31, 1934; Graham Lacy to ACLU, May 1, 1934, Charles H. S. Houk to Harry E. Ward, May 3, 1934, vol. 731, ACLU Papers.

40 *DW*, May 10, 15, 18, July 7, 9, 1934; Louise Thompson, "Southern Terror," 327–28; Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors, ACLU, July 9, 1934, ACLU Records, reel 5; ACLU, *Weekly Bulletin* 613 (May 18, 1934): 1–2; *ibid.*, 615 (June 1, 1934): 1–2; Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors, ACLU, May 14, 1934, ACLU Records, reel 5. Those arrested in the first wave included Boris Israel, Harold Ralston, Carl Wilson, Holland Williams, and Israel Berlin (who at the time of the arrest used the pseudonym "R. S. Harris"). Black Communist Arthur Green was jailed for merely possessing six thousand circulars titled "An Appeal to Labor," and a few days later, Robert Williams, the black printer responsible for producing the circulars, was also arrested. *DW*, May 29, June 4, 1934; *Birmingham Post*, May 23, 1934; *Birmingham News*, May 22, 1934; John Howard Lawson, "In Dixieland," 9; "Statement of Israel Berlin, January 9, 1937," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 15(C): 6315.

41 There are numerous references to Moser and his Red Squad in the *Daily Worker* and the *Southern Worker*. Established in 1931, the unit lasted well into 1937 (Painter, *Narrative*, 185; "Testimony of Jack Barton [Bart Logan]," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:762). On Section 4902, see City Commission of the City of Birmingham, *The General Code, 1930*, 169.

42 Clyde Johnson interview with author.

43 *DW*, October 9, 1934; "Statement of Helen Longs, December 30, 1936," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:967.

44 *DW*, August 4, 21, 31, September 19, 1934; "Statement of Israel Berlin, January 9, 1937," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 15(C): 6316.

45 *DW*, July 28, 1934; Jack Conroy, "Reception in Alabama," *Labor Defender* 11 (September 1935): 9; Beth McHenry, "A Birmingham Dick Sees Red," *Labor Defender* 10 (November 1934): 9, 20; *Birmingham Post*, October 2, 1934; *DW*, May 31, September 27, 1934, January 21, 1935; *SW*, November 1934; Wood [Charles Sherrill], *To Live and Die in Dixie*, 15; *Birmingham Post*, October 25, 1935; *DW*, November 3, 1934; Delegation of National Committee for the Defense of Political Prisoners, "Report on Georgia-Alabama," July 19, 1934, vol. 925,

ACLU Papers; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 2; "City Commission of the City of Birmingham, Minutes," October 2, 1934, p. 427.

46 DW, November 3, December 17, 1934; *Labor Advocate*, April 27, 1934; Ross, "Some Problems of the Class Struggle," 67; Moore quoted in SW, December 1934; Hare quoted in *Birmingham News*, October 20, 1935.

47 SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 2; *Birmingham Post*, October 20, 1934; DW, October 26, 1934. Of the three Communists convicted, black Communist Fred Hall and white Communist Israel Berlin were sentenced to six months' hard labor and a \$100 fine. (DW, December 3, 6, 10, 1934, January 21, February 12, 1935; SW, January 1935; "Alabama," *Labor Defender* 10 (December 1934): 9; Jack Conroy, "Reception in Alabama," *Labor Defender* 11 (September 1935): 9; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 3; "Statement by Israel Berlin, January 9, 1937," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 15(C): 6316.)

48 John Howard Lawson, "In Dixieland," 8; "Statement of Jesse G. Owen, December 28, 1936," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:964; DW, July 3, 1935; Louise Thompson, "Southern Terror," 328; *Birmingham Post*, October 15, 1934; Ingalls, "Antiradical Violence," 524; *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 29, 1934; Labor Research Association, *Labor Fact Book*, 3:166, 168; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 8; *Kourier* 11 (December 1934), 16; Wood [Charles Sherrill], "The ILD in Dixie," 24; Rice, *The Ku Klux Klan*, 101–2; Chalmers, *Hooded Americanism*, 307–18; Wade, *The Fiery Cross*, 258.

49 Wood [Charles Sherrill], "The ILD in Dixie," 24; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview by H. L. Mitchell, 34–35; DW, November 26, 1934, February 13, 29, 1935; BWDS (Notebooks); Ingalls, "Antiradical Violence," 524.

50 DW, August 15, 16, 1934; see also DW, October 22, 1934; S. B. [Ted Wellman], "Party Problems in Birmingham," *Party Organizer* 7 (September 1934): 13–16; Ross, "The Communist Party in the Birmingham Strikes," 699, "Some Problems of the Class Struggle," 68–69, and "The Next Steps in Alabama," 976.

51 "Statement of Jesse G. Owen, December 28, 1936," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:963; DW, May 4, 31, 1934. Although this figure is probably an inflated accounting of actual dues-paying members, it still does not take into account members who have "fallen through the cracks." For many unemployed workers in Birmingham, the joining fee of fifty cents and the monthly dues of two cents constituted a significant sum of money, and during difficult months Party members did not pay their monthly dues and thus were not counted. Moreover, new members who failed to receive their membership books within a

reasonable amount of time sometimes quit because they viewed the books as a form of protection (memorandum by R. M. Howell, November 1, 1932, p. 2, Box 2847, MID Records; Tom Johnson to Jim Allen, October 14, 26, 1931, Box 7, Draper Papers (Emory); James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 53–54; Hudson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author; *DW*, July 27, 1934).

52 *DW*, October 13, 1934; "To the White Workers and Farmers of Alabama: To the Negro People of Alabama: Vote Communist!" leaflet, issued October 1934, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; quotation from "For the Right to Vote," handbill, 1934, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers. The Communist slate included gubernatorial candidate John M. Davis, an expelled Mine Mill organizer and ore miner; Rance Smith, a black TCI worker and candidate for lieutenant governor; Andrew Forsman, former president of the Mobile Trades and Labor Council; and Norman Ragland, a black railroad worker. Both Forsman and Ragland made their bid for congressional seats representing Mobile and Birmingham districts, respectively ("A Call to Action," handbill, ca. 1934, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers).

CHAPTER FOUR

1 The best account of the Scottsboro case is Dan T. Carter's, *Scottsboro*: see also, Murray, "The NAACP versus the Communist Party."

2 *SW*, April 4, 1931; *DW*, April 4, 25, 1931; *Chattanooga Daily Times*, April 24, 1931; James S. Allen, "Communism in the Deep South," 109; James S. Allen, "Scottsboro—A Proclamation of Freedom," *Labor Defender* 11 (June 1935): 14-15; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 49–59; Murray, "The NAACP versus the Communist Party," 278; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 60; *DW*, April 17, 18, 1931.

3 Cash, *Mind of the South*, 330–33; *Labor Advocate*, April 27, 1934; Jarvis interview with author; Louise Thompson, "Southern Terror," 327; and for a broader discussion of these postbellum myths, see Lawrence J. Friedman, *White Savage*.

4 Champly, *White Women, Coloured Men*, 252 (emphasis in the original); Louise Thompson, "Southern Terror," 328; Crenshaw and Miller, *Scottsboro: The Firebrand of Communism*, 297'. Even the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching was labeled "communistic" because of its strong stance against lynching (Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 175).

5 Reprinted in *Atlanta Daily World*, December 16, 1931;

Birmingham *Reporter*, June 13, 1931; White, "The Negro and the Communists," 67; and for a thorough discussion of the battle between the ILD and the NAACP, see Carter, *Scottsboro*, 68–102; Murray, "The NAACP versus the Communist Party."

6 Director of Branches, NAACP, to Charles A. J. McPherson, May 7, 1931; Charles A. J. McPherson to William Pickens, November 26, 1929; Director of Branches, NAACP, to Mr. Strawbridge, March 26, 1929, "Report of Membership for Birmingham, Alabama, Branch of NAACP," January 21, 1931; all in Box G-1, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Birmingham *Reporter*, February 22, March 1, 1930.

7 SW, October 11, 18, 1930; "Down With Lynching!" leaflet (copy), *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 157; Montgomery *Advertiser*, July 15, 18, 1930; Birmingham *News*, July 20, 1930; Tuscaloosa *News*, July 7, 1930; "In Re: Emelle, Alabama, July 4, 1930—Confidential Narrative from One Who Knows," Bibb Graves to J. W. McClung, October 25, 1930, File 8, Raper Papers.

8 SW, November 15, 29, 1930; "Minutes of the Convention of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights Held in St. Louis, Missouri, November 15 and 16, 1930," pp. 2–3, "Resolution on the Revolutionary Traditions of the Negroes," encl., Memorandum re: League of Struggle for Negro Rights, from K.R. McIntire to Mr. Mumford, October 6, 1942, FBI File 100–14808-1; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 346–47; "Draft Program of the League of Struggle for Negro Rights," n.d., 1–3, Box 12, Minor Papers; League of Struggle for Negro Rights, *Equality, Land and Freedom*.

9 SW, April 11, June 27, 1931.

10 Confidential Memorandum Re: State v. Peterson, Birmingham, Alabama, September 2, 1933, mimeo, Box 25, CIC Collection; *Petition and Brief in Support of Application for Certiorari, Willie Peterson v. The State of Alabama*, typescript, 1933, pp. 7–8, Box D-68, NAACP Papers, Legal Files; Birmingham *News*, August 5, 1931; SW, August 15, 1931; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 129; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 148–54; Angelo Herndon, "My Life," n.d., typescript, p. 11, ILD Papers, reel 9.

11 Quotation from Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 164, also see 148–164; DW, August 12, 13, 14, 19, 1931; SW, August 15, 29, 1931; *Liberator*, August 22, September 5, October 17, 1931; Birmingham *News*, August 8, 10, 12, 24, 1931; Montgomery *Advertiser*, August 28, 1931; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson interview with author; Solomon, "Red and Black," 410.

12 Birmingham *News*, August 9, 1931; SW, August 15, 1931.

13 “Interracial Cooperation in Alabama,” report by James D. Burton, Interstate Secretary, Oakdale, Tennessee, 1931, Box 142, CIC Collection; “Radical Activities in Alabama: Report of Sub-Committee of State Interracial Commission,” 1931, and CIC Press Release, “Races Warned Against Plots of Communists,” August 27, 1931, Box 27, CIC Collection. The committee consisted of R. B. Eleazer, CIC educational director; Dr. Henry M. Edmonds; Robert Jemison, Jr.; C. B. Glenn; Reverend M. Sears; W. B. Driver; Dr. Robinson Brown of Tuscaloosa; and Jesse Herrin of Montgomery.

14 Confidential Memorandum Re: State v. Peterson, Birmingham, Alabama, September 2, 1933, mimeo, Box 25, CIC Collection; *DW*, October 13, 14, 15, 1931; *Liberator*, October 24, 1931.

15 *Petition and Brief— . . . Willie Peterson v. The State of Alabama*, 20–21, Box D-68, NAACP Papers, Legal Files. The assumption that Peterson's actions were linked to Communist literature was also suggested in a Birmingham *News* editorial (August 8, 1931).

16 Harris Gilbert [Harry Simms] to Jim Allen, September 24, 25, 1931, Box 7, Draper Papers (Emory); *Liberator*, November 7, 1931; quotation from “Interview with Henrietta Peterson, by Charles McPherson,” October 24, 1931, Box D-65, NAACP Papers, Legal Files; A. G. Robertson to William Pickens, October 5, 1931, Box G-I, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Hudson, *Black Worker*, 33.

17 Birmingham *News*, December 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 1931; Birmingham *Post*, January 25, 1932; Atlanta *Daily World*, December 11, 1931; *SW*, November 21, 1931, January 30, 1932; Charles McPherson to Walter White, November 24, December 9, 1931, Box D-65, NAACP Papers, Legal Files.

18 Charles A. J. McPherson to William Pickens, March 2, 1932, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; McPherson to White, February 3, 9, 1932, quotation from McPherson to White, February 17, 1932, Box D-65, NAACP Papers, Legal Files; Membership Report, Birmingham Branch of NAACP, May 31, 1932, Charles A. J. McPherson to Robert Bagnall, Director of Branches, June 18, 1932, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files.

19 W. W. Harris, Press Committee, Birmingham Branch of NAACP, to Birmingham *Post* Newspaper, August 24, 1932, and Memo from Walter White to Roy Wilkins, August 31, 1932, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files.

20 Pittsburgh *Courier*, May 14, 1932; Murphy to Painter, March 1978, p. 11, NPHH Collection; Painter, *Narrative*, 104–6; Hudson interview with author; quotation from Painter, ““Social Equality,”” 59; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 155–56. Al Murphy

likely informed the black press of the incident.

21 For a detailed account of the Herndon case, see Charles Martin, *The Angelo Herndon Case*.

22 DW, September 23, 24, 26, 1932; R. M. Howell, "Summary of Subversive Situation for Month of September, 1932," n.d., Box 2848, MID Records; Report by Lt. Ralph E. Hurst to Brigadier General J. C. Persons—"Subject: Communist Agitation," Birmingham, October 19, 1932, p. 1, Drawer 34, Governor Miller Papers; DW, September 29, November 6, October 4, 1932; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 151; DW, November 6, 1932; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson interview with author; R. M. Howell, "Intelligence Summary of Subversive Situation," October 1932, p. 3, Box 2848, MID Records.

23 Report by Lt. Ralph E. Hurst to Brigadier General J. C. Persons—"Subject: Communist Agitation," Birmingham, October 19, 1932, p. 2, Drawer 34, Governor Miller Papers; Baltimore *Afro-American*, October 15, 1932; "Report of International Labor Defense Meeting, October 2, 1932, as given by Ralph Hurst over telephone," n.d., typescript, p. 1, Box 2848, MID Records; DW, November 6, 1932; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson interview with author; quotation from Painter, *Narrative*, 128. Even Charles McPherson admitted that "quite a few Negroes were reported to have attended the meeting of Reds" (Charles A. J. McPherson to Walter White, November 15, 1932, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files).

24 R. M. Howell, "Intelligence Summary of Subversive Situation," December 1932, p. 3, Box 2848, MID Records; Ross, "Utilize the Rising Militancy," 20.

25 Quotation from DW, November 6, 1932; Ruby Bates to Earl Streetman, January 5, 1932, ILD Papers, reel 2; DW, February 13, 1933; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 181–82, 186, 191–234; Leibowitz, *The Defender*, 189–92.

26 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 82–83.

27 Charles A. J. McPherson to Walter White, April 15, 1933, "Newspaper Release of Birmingham Branch of the NAACP," April 14, 1933, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files.

28 Lawrence Gellert to Louis Coleman, April 3, 1933, end., "Report on Mass Meeting of Citizens Scottsboro Aid Committee of Birmingham, Ala." March 31, 1933, and telegram from W. G. B., Birmingham Editor to DW, April 16, 1933, ILD Papers, reel 2; Kester interview (SOHP), 33; Francis Ralston Welsh to Martin Dies, Jr., April 26, 1933, Box 79, *National Republic* Files; "Civic Meeting on the Scottsboro Case," leaflet, ca. April 1933), Kester Papers, reel 1, also reprinted in Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 35.

29 Reverend William G. McDowell to Dr. Will Alexander, June 30, 1933, Box 25, CIC Collection; Oscar Adams to Walter White, May 20, 1933, Box D-65, NAACP Papers, Legal Files; *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 27, 28, 1933; Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 148–49; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 259.

30 SW, August 15, 31, 1933; *Tuscaloosa News*, August 2, 1933; Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, *Plight of Tuscaloosa*, 10–15, 17–18; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, August 2, 1933; *Atlanta Constitution*, August 2, 1933. See also Henry B. Foster to Col. Harry M. Ayers, September 4–12, 1933 (copy); J. R. Steelman, “Notes, Tuscaloosa Investigation,” typescript, October 1933, p. 3; and “Tuscaloosa Case: Trip to Vance,” typescript, November 1933; all in File 15-C, Raper Papers; Taub, “Prelude to a Lynching,” 6; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 276–77; Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 224–26; see also Blasi, *Segregationist Violence*, 22–26.

31 SW, September 20, 1933; *Tuscaloosa News*, September 27, October 8, 1933; Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, *Plight of Tuscaloosa*, 34–35; Carter, *Scottsboro*, 277. Most Alabama liberals and many leading black citizens attributed the lynchings to the ILD's presence. See, for instance, *Tuscaloosa News*, August 14, 1933; *St. Louis Argus*, August 25, 1933; Thomas Watson, letter to Editor, *Birmingham News*, May 10, 1933; Cason, *90° in the Shade*, 119; Ben A. Green, *A History of Tuscaloosa*, 100; Shapiro, *White Violence and Black Response*, 225; interviews with Dr. McKenzie, Dr. Gilmer, Mr. E. S. Smith, Mr. O'Rourke and Mrs. H. C. Bryant, in Ralph J. Bunche, “Field Notes—Southern Trip, Book IV,” typescript, n.d., 18–19, 28–31, 33, 46, Box 82, Bunche Papers.

32 *Birmingham News*, September 25, 1933; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, September 26, 1933; *Atlanta Daily World*, September 26, 1933; Rosa Durham, “Summary of Our Contact with Dennis Cross,” typescript, ca. 1933, and Foster to Col. Harry Ayers, September 30, 1933, File 15-C, Raper Papers; Southern Commission on the Study of Lynching, *Plight of Tuscaloosa*, 27–28.

33 Ralph Bunche interview with Dr. McKenzie and Dr. Gilmer, January 7, 1939, p. 29, Bunche interview with Mr. E. S. Smith, November 17, 1939, p. 32, Bunche interview with Mr. O'Rourke, November 16, 1939, pp. 18–21, Ralph J. Bunche, “Field Notes—Southern Trip, Book IV,” typescript, n.d., Box 82, Bunche Papers; *Birmingham News*, July 24, 1934; *Atlanta Journal*, July 25, 1934; *Birmingham Post*, July 28, 1934; *Montevallo Times*, July 27, 1934; Ann Wells Ellis, “Commission on Interracial Cooperation,” 101.

34 Carter, *Scottsboro*, 268–70; *Birmingham Post*, August 10, 1933; *Birmingham World*, June 30, 1933; *Pittsburgh Courier*, April 8, 1933.

35 Charles Houston to Robert Moton, July 29, 1933, and Charles McPherson to Walter White, July 18, 1933, Box D-65, NAACP Papers, Legal Files. White liberal minister Rev. William McDowell shared Houston's assessment, observing early in the summer of 1933 that blacks practically gave up on the NAACP because of its failure to free Peterson (Rev. William G. McDowell to Dr. Will Alexander, June 30, 1933, Box 25, CIC Collection).

36 Quotation from Walter White to Robert Moton, January 25, 1934, McPherson to White, January 6, 1934; McPherson to Governor B. M. Miller, January 12, 1934; White to Governor B. M. Miller, January 11, 1934; all in Box D-66, NAACP Papers, Legal Files.

37 "Willie Peterson Saved!" leaflet, ca. 1934, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; SW, February 10, March 25, 1934; Memorandum from Charles Houston to John Altman, February 10, 1934, Box 25, CIC Collection. As Charles Houston observed, "Mrs. Peterson is so distraught that the Communists are getting control over her" (Memorandum from Charles Houston to John Altman, February 10, 1934, *ibid.*).

38 "Executive Clemency Petition to the Honorable Governor, State of Alabama," submitted by Birmingham Branch of the NAACP, March 1934, pp. 1-3; Charles McPherson to Walter White, March 20, 1934; White to Governor B. M. Miller, March 22, 1934; all in Box D-66, NAACP Papers, Legal Files; Birmingham *Post*, March 20, 1934; Birmingham *News*, March 20, 1934.

39 Charles A. J. McPherson to Walter White, May 9, 1934, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Emily Clay to Walter White, December 2, 1935, Box D-66, NAACP Papers, Legal Files.

40 DW, May 31, December 12, 1934, May 7, 14, June 22, 1935; Wood [Charles Sherrill], *To Live and Die in Dixie*, 14. In Selma alone, the ILD claimed 250 members (Beth McHenry, "A Birmingham Dick Sees Red," *Labor Defender* 10 [October 1934]: 9).

CHAPTER FIVE

1 Quotation from *DW*, April 19, 1930, May 4, 1934; Hudson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author; “Proposals for Party Training in the South (District 17),” *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 106–7. In March of 1932, the district bureau complained that no whites—outside of the bureau itself—attended Party meetings in Birmingham (Minutes of Meeting of District Bureau, District 17, March 13, 1932, Box 7, Drapers Papers [Emory]).

2 The following interpretation draws a great deal from George Lipsitz’s brilliant biography, *A Life in the Struggle*. I should add that white Alabamians contributed some to the CP’s culture of opposition, but their presence was so small during the first five years of Party activity as to be insignificant. Nonetheless, many of the issues discussed below pertaining to whites are dealt with throughout the first four chapters. The Southern white presence becomes much more prevalent during the Popular Front (see especially Chapters 6 and 10).

3 Quotation from John Howard Lawson, “In Dixieland,” 9; Samuel A. Darcy to District 17, Communist Party, April 28, 1930, and Tom Johnson to Sam Darcy, May 8, 1930, *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 105–6; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 62; *SW*, September 20, 1930; Tom Johnson quotation from “Proposals for Party Training in the South,” *Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 106–7. In 1930, 26.2 percent of the blacks and only 4.9 percent of the whites in Alabama could not read or write, and in Birmingham only 14.7 percent of the black population and 1.0 percent of the whites were illiterate. In Tallapoosa County, where the Party was strongest outside of Birmingham, the percentage was just a little higher at 27.1 percent. (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Negroes in the United States*, 236.) But those who were semiliterate with only a few years of formal education made up the bulk of the working class. The 1940 Census reported that 13.8 percent of the total black population had no schooling at all, while 40.3 percent had between one and four years of school. Only about 7.5 percent actually attended high school (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census, 1940: Population*, 2[1]: 223).

4 Hudson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Lemon Johnson interview with author; *DW*, August 11, 1934, January 19, 1935; U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Fifteenth Census, 1930: Population*, 6:70, 97.

5 *DW*, June 12, 1934; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 56; Lemon Johnson interview with author; Clyde Johnson

interview with author; North, *No Men Are Strangers*, 192; quotation from *DW*, November 14, 1933.

6 Painter, *Narrative*, 102; Smith interview with author; [Al Murphy], “Agrarian Work,” 81.

7 Garner interview (WLC), 8; Painter, *Narrative*, 224, chap. 10; quotation from Hudson interview with author.

8 Memorandum by R. M. Howell, November 1, 1932, Box 2847, MID Records; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 115, 124; Murphy to Painter, March 1978, p. 29, NPHH Collection; Bloor, *We Are Many*, 256; *DW*, July 25, 1934; quotation from *WW*, September 1934. In the *Daily Worker*, Tasker is listed as “Equile McKeithen”—undoubtedly to protect her identity.

9 Quotation from *YW*, March 16, 1931; Stone, “Agrarian Conflict in Alabama,” 59. YCL members in rural Alabama complained constantly about discrimination in public education. See, for instance, *YW*, April 6, 1931; *DW*, May 16, 1934. For a broader discussion of inequities in Southern education during the 1920s and 1930s, see Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, esp. chap. 5; Charles S. Johnson, *Growing Up in the Black Belt*, 102–5; Bond, *Negro Education in Alabama*, 251–61; Garner interview (WLC), 1.

10 *DW*, April 4, June 7, May 10, 1934; Clyde Johnson interview with author.

11 For examples of black mothers’ traditional attitudes, see Janiewski, *Sisterhood Denied*, 45; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt Against Chivalry*, 142.

12 On the Young Pioneers, see Green interview with author. See *Liberator* (1931) for the series on black history by Quirt. The episode of “Matt Owen” described above appeared in *YW*, January 4 and November 11, 1932.

13 G. M. Williams, Home Demonstration Agent, “Supplement to the Annual Report of the Agricultural Extension Work among Negroes in Alabama, Lee County, for the Year Ending November 30, 1935,” encl., “Games and Songs for Old and Young,” mimeo, n.d., Records of the Federal Extension Service, reel 58.

14 Garner interview (WLC), 4; ILD Press Service, “The Fight of the Alabama Sharecroppers: An Interview with the Niece of Ralph Gray,” by Sasha Small, April 21, 1934, CJP, reel 13; *DW*, August 16, 1934; “To All White and Negro Workers and Poor Farmers in the South,”

handbill, 1934, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers.

15 Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle*, 227–30.

16 Hudson interview with author; see also Painter, *Narrative*, 95; Kelley, “Comrades, Praise Gawd for Lenin and Them!”

17 Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 73; Page, *Gathering Storm*, 327; see similar statements in Painter, *Narrative*, 95; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*, 319.

18 *DW*, July 4, 1935.

19 Garner interview (WLC), 4; Lemon Johnson interview with author; *DW*, October 3, 1935.

20 *DW*, November 26, 1934, January 14, 1935; *SW*, February, 1935; BWDS (Notebooks); and on the relationship between lynching and counteraggression, see McGovern, *Anatomy of a Lynching*, 153–56; Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, *Revolt against Chivalry*, 133.

21 The following theoretical analysis will be based largely on James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*; de Certeau, “On the Oppositional Practices of Everyday Life,” 3–8.

22 See, for example, Dee Brown, “Sharecropper,” *DW*, April 23, 1934; Grace Lumpkin, *A Sign for Cain*; Page, *Gathering Storm*; Beth Mitchell, “A Night in Alabama,” *DW*, May 11, 1935; Gold, “Examples of Worker Correspondence,” 87; Kenneth Patchen, “Southern Organizer,” *DW*, August 10, 1935.

23 Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 396; *Montgomery Advertiser*, May 19, 20, 1933; and for DeBardeleben's involvement in the Party and the ILD, Painter, *Narrative*, esp. 102; Hudson interview with author.

24 Jarvis interview with author; Garner interview (WLC), 7; Parham and Robinson, “‘If I Could Go Back ...,’” 232; Markey [Myra Page] interview (SOHP), 109. I am indebted to Robert A. Hill for his insights into the various ways African-Americans adapted trickster strategies to twentieth-century realities.

25 Lemon Johnson interview with author; Murphy, “Negro Share Croppers Build Their Unions,” 14; James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 103; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Smith interview with author; *YW*, October 9, 1934; Saul Davis to Clyde Johnson, March 30, 1937, CJP, reel 13.

26 Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 286; 322–32. Although most writers on the Left assumed docility was a reflection of workers' backward consciousness, there were some astonishing exceptions. In a vitriolic

review of Carl Carmer's *Stars Fell on Alabama* in the *Daily Worker*, one writer explained in vivid terms why a black sharecropper who had just been beaten by his landlord justified his own beating to Carmer: "Why should a Negro worker confide in this author who plays the role of a stoop pigeon in a prison and comes around after the torture to inquire sadistically how the victims liked it?" (*DW*, August 30, 1934).

27 Copy of ILD leaflet in *Labor Defender* 11 (January 1935): 7; "800 White and Negro Workers," Birmingham, Alabama, to Governor Bibb Graves, February 20, 1935, Drawer 101, Governor Graves Papers.

28 *DW*, October 3, 1935; Lemon Johnson interview with author; *DW*, March 29, 1934 (emphasis mine); *YW*, July 3, 1934. For an excellent example of the changing voice in anonymous protest letters, see E. P. Thompson, "The Crime of Anonymity."

29 This point has been made by Scott, *Weapons of the Weak*, 317, 319; Fink, "The New Labor History"; Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle*, 230–34.

30 *YW*, July 3, 1934; *DW*, March 22, 1934.

31 *DW*, February 22, March 22, April 19, 1934.

32 *DW*, April 7, 1934; *SW*, July 1936. As early as 1932, the same song was sung by black Communists in Chicago, but their version was slightly different in that it referred to the "New Communist Spirit" (*DW*, September 30, 1932, quoted in Denisoff, *Great Day Coming*, 37). For examples of adaptations of "We Shall Not Be Moved," see *Labor Defender* 9 (December 1933): 80; Harold Preece to Anne Johnson, December 25, 1936, CJP, reel 13.

33 *SW*, July 18, 1931.

34 For an excellent discussion of this tradition, see McCallum, "Songs of Work and Songs of Worship." Ella May Wiggins, a young white textile worker who was felled by a bullet during the Gastonia textile strike, and "Aunt" Molly Jackson and Florence Reece, natives of Kentucky who were active in the National Miners Union, left a wealth of radical folk songs, blues, and spirituals describing and praising the activities of the Communists in the South (Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, 245–75; Denisoff, *Great Day Coming*, 19–26; Margaret Larkin, "The Story of Ella May," *New Masses* 5 [November 1929]: 3–4; Wiley, "Songs of the Gastonia Textile Strike"; Hevener, *Which Side Are You On?*, 61, 67–68).

35 Reprinted in *SW*, March 25, 1934. See also *DW*, November 7, 1933; Denisoff, *Great Day Coming*, 37, and Denisoff, *Sing A Song*, 54;

Harold Preece, "Folk Music of the South," *New South* 1 (March 1938): 14.

36 SW, October 20, 1930.

37 SW, September 1936.

38 See Frank, "Negro Revolutionary Music," 29; Schatz, "Songs of the Negro Worker," 6–8; Lawrence Gellert, "Negro Songs of Protest," *New Masses* 6 (April 1931): 6–8.

39 Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 11–12.

40 DW, July 4, 1935; see also DW, April 13, 1933; Hudson interview with author. According to Gil Green, in 1935 the Party had over three hundred members in the South who were also members of church youth groups, especially the Baptist Young Peoples Union. In fact, he called on the Birmingham district to build Party units in the church youth organizations long before it was sanctioned by the Tenth National Convention in 1938 ("Report from Gil Green for the National Bureau to a Meeting of the Enlarged National Executive Committee held in New York, February 23, 1935," *International of Youth* (March 1935): 25).

41 Garner interview (WLC), 5; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 75.

42 Asbury Smith, "What Can the Negro Expect from Communism?" 211; Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 78.

43 Kelley, "Comrades, Praise Gawd for Lenin and Them!" 64–66; Hudson interview with author; also Painter, *Narrative*, 134–35; SW, February 10, 1934; DW, May 4, 1934; and on the Party's official position toward religion during the Third Period, see Stevens, *The Church and the Workers*; Roy, *Communism and the Churches*, 29–47. A rare example of the CP's acknowledged atheism in the South is Tom Johnson's pamphlet, *The Reds in Dixie* (1935), which announced that the Communists' did not believe in God but added that the Party would not force anyone to renounce their religious beliefs.

44 Pettiford quoted in Washington, *The Negro in Business*, 136; Birmingham *Reporter*, July 4, 1931.

45 "Department of Commerce Press Release, Birmingham, Alabama—Retail Stores Operated by Negro Proprietors," August 5, 1938, Box 2, BPRM; Franklin D. Wilson, "The Ecology of a Black Business District," 359–60.

46 Hunter, "Don't Buy from Where You Can't Work," 60–63.

47 Birmingham *Reporter*, August 15, 1931; Charles A. J. McPherson

to Mary White Ovington, April 7, 1933, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files. The clearest exposition of this attitude is in Haynes, "Communists Are Bidding for Negro Loyalty," esp. 153–56. Intelligence sources accepted the same assumption that the masses of blacks simply followed their "leaders." As R.M. Howell reported in 1932, "If the religious leaders and the educated Negroes can be held in line there will be little danger [of Communist support] among the masses of the colored race" (R. M. Howell, "Military Intelligence—The G-2 Estimate of the Subversive Situation in the Fourth Corps Area," January 1, 1932, p. 6, Box 2847, MID Records).

48 Rev. P. Colfax Rameau to Joseph B. Keenan, U.S. Assistant Attorney General, March 19, 1934, and Rev. P. Colfax Rameau to Chairman, U.S. Judicial Committee, February 26, 1934, Straight Numerical Files, 158260, Sub File #10, Records of the Department of Justice, RG 60; "Petition to the Birmingham City Commission," January 24, 1933, p. 2, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; see also Haynes, "Communists Are Bidding for Negro Loyalty," 156.

49 "Interview, Dr. E. W. Taggart," November 18, 1940, p. 38, "Memo on interview with Mr. Irving James and Mr. Joseph Gelders," July 25, 1939, p. 4, Box 82, Bunche Papers; excerpt from *Birmingham Weekly Review*, December 16, 1934 (typescript), ILD Papers, reel 8; *Birmingham World*, December 22, 1934; *SW*, January 1935; "Interview, Robert Durr," November 18, 1939, p. 42, Box 82, Bunche Papers; Memorandum from Nelson C. Jackson, Southern Field Director [National Urban League] to Lester B. Granger, December 10, 1948, BUL Papers.

50 Painter, *Narrative*, 152–55; FBI Report on Joseph Gelders, Esther M. Gelders, and Margie Gelders, September 28, 1941, HQ File 61–9512. The FBI even suggested that Jordan's funeral home was a district committee meeting place.

51 *DW*, October 30, 1934; *SW*, November 1934; John A. Boykin, Solicitor General, Atlanta Judicial Circuit to Walter S. Steele, March 11, 1935, end., ILD leaflet, n.d., Box 180, *National Republic* Files; *DW*, November 14, 1934; "Alabama," *Labor Defender* 10 (December 1934): 9; International Labor Defense, "Long-Term Prisoners in the United States as of June, 1936," typescript, n.d., ILD Vertical Files, Tamiment Institute, New York.

52 *SW*, July 4, August 5, February 21, April 18, June 20, 1931.

53 "A Call to Action," handbill, 1934, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers; Chandler interview (WLC), 1; Grace interview (WLC), 4–5; Mitch interview (WLC), 7. According to a Department of Labor Report in 1919, "all the Negro preachers had been subsidized by the

companies and were without exception preaching against the negroes joining unions” (H. B. Vaughn to George E. Haynes, March 5, 1919, File No. 8/102-D, “Special Problems—Birmingham,” Records of the Department of Labor, RG 174).

54 Parham and Robinson, “‘If I Could Go Back ...,’” 233. Black anti-clericalism was by no means a Communist invention. As Lawrence Levine points out, the black minister has frequently been a focal point of black ridicule, thus challenging the myth that blacks blindly invested 100 percent trust in their religious institutions (Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, 326–28).

55 Herndon, *Let Me Live*, 88; Murphy to Painter, March, 1978, p. 8, NPHH Collection; Hudson interview with author.

56 Memorandum by R. M. Howell, November 1, 1932, Box 2848, MID Records; Painter, *Narrative*, 123–24; Hudson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author. In Painter's narrative Keith is listed as “MacKurth.”

57 Garner interview (WLC), 3, 8; Painter, *Narrative*, 99, 122, 271; Hudson interview with author; Jarvis interview with author.

58 Painter, *Narrative*, 101–2; “To All Captains of the Share Croppers Union Locals,” unsigned memo, Birmingham, Alabama, August 10, 1932, Box 2848, MID Records (in Hudson's narrative Collins is referred to as “Old Dr. Thompson”); Toler, “The Negro and Communism,” 70, 73, 99.

59 Hudson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Benson interview (WLC), 2, 5; Curtis Maggard interview (WLC), 2; Earl Brown interview (WLC), 7. Black ministers were active in the labor movement as early as the 1890s (Worthman, “Black Workers and the Labor Unions,” 64–65).

60 *Labor Advocate*, March 5, 19, 1932; quotation from Wilmington, (N.C.), *Union Labor Record*, August 22, 1930; Resolution from G. W. Reed, Forty-Fifth Street Baptist Church, Birmingham, March 11, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers. Late in 1932, branch secretary Charles McPherson admitted to “meeting with some handicaps and bold evasions by some of our pastors” (Charles A. J. McPherson to Robert W. Bagnall, November 2, 1932, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files).

61 James S. Allen, “Communism in the Deep South,” 122; quotation from “Draft Resolution on Negro Work,” ca. 1931, p. 3, Box 12, Minor Papers. See also, “National Buro Letter no. 1, To All District and Sub-

District Organizers,” February 11, 1932, p. 3, ILD Vertical Files, Tamiment Institute; Painter, *Narrative*, 129–33.

62 SW, June 10, 1933; Estell interview (BPRM), 1–2; Washington interview (WLC), 37; Painter, *Narrative*, 170–77.

CHAPTER SIX

1 For an overview of the transition from the Third Period to the Popular Front, see Claudin, *Communist Movement*, 1:166–99; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, chap. 10; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 169–71.

2 SW, October 1934; Nat Ross to Howard Kester, November 30, 1934, Kester Papers, reel 1.

3 DW, December 29, 1934, January 1, 3, 1935; SW, December 1934, January 1935; Howard Kester to Francis Miller, March 19, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers; DW, December 31, 1934, June 4, 1935; SW, June 1935; Ross, “The Next Steps in Alabama,” 974.

4 Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 61–62, 136; Revolutionary Policy Committee, *An Appeal*; quotation from DW, January 5, 1935. For more on Highlander's nonsectarian policies, see Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 42–45, 130–32, 136–37; Adams, *Unearthing Seeds of Fire*; Horton, “Highlander Folk School”; Glen, *Highlander*.

5 DW, November 19, December 3, 26, 1934, January 1, 1935.

6 DW, April 2, 20, 27, July 3, 1935; “On May Day Let Us Unite to Unionize the South,” leaflet, 1935, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers.

7 DW, May 4, 14, 1935; SW, February 1936; Wood [Charles Sherrill], “The ILD in Dixie,” 24; Wood [Charles Sherrill], *To Live and Die in Dixie*, 17; Robert Wood to Roger N. Baldwin, May 4, 1935, vol. 826, ACLU Papers; Ingalls, “Antiradical Violence,” 525; Robert Wood to Governor Bibb Graves, May 21, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Owen [Boris Israel], “Night Ride in Birmingham”; “Statement by Blaine Owen, February 25, 1937,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 15(C): 6324; *Birmingham Post*, May 21, 1935; DW, May 20, July 3, 1935. For other examples of the post-May Day wave of terror, see DW, May 16, 24, 1935; SPCR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 7–8; ACLU *Weekly Bulletin* 664 (May 10, 1935): 2.

8 *Birmingham Post*, March 29, 1935; *Birmingham News*, April 1, 4, 1935; DW, April 16, 18, 22, 27, 1935; SW, May 1935; Peter A. Carmichael to H. L. Kerwin, Director of Conciliation, Department of

Labor, March 26, 1935, Box 3, Taft Papers; *DW*, May 11, 1935; *Labor Advocate*, April 20, 1935; "A Call to Action!" handbill, ca. 1935, "On May Day Let Us Unite to Unionize the South," leaflet, 1935, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers; "The I.L.D. and the Laundry Workers," leaflet, ca. May 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; "The Laundry Strike Goes on, Regardless of Statements to the Contrary," circular, ca. June 1935, Box 1, Taft Papers.

9 *DW*, May 4, 8, 28, 1935; *SW*, June 1935; *Chattanooga Times*, May 27, 1935; Nat Ross to Howard Kester, May 18, 1935, and James Dombrowski to H. L. Mitchell, May 11, 1935, Kester Papers; Wood [Charles Sherrill], "The ILD in Dixie," 24; Robert Sherrill, *Gothic Politics*, 77–81; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 137–38; Laurent Frantz interview with author.

10 *DW*, July 4, 1935; see also Kling, "Making the Revolution," 308–9; "July 4th," leaflet, 1935, Box 143, J. B. Matthews Papers.

11 Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 126–59; Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, 34, 83–84; Earl Browder, "The United Front—Key to Our New Tactical Orientation," *Communist* 14 (December 1935): 1119–20; James W. Ford, "The Negro People and the Farmer-Labor Party," *ibid.*, 1136–37; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 343–44; Minutes of the Negro Commission, August 3, 1936, Box 12, Minor Papers.

12 *DW*, February 8, May 11, April 30, August 14, 29, 1935. R. E. Duke is probably the same "Dukes" Hudson refers to in Painter, *Narrative*, 164–66.

13 Carter, *Scottsboro*, 320–24; "Scottsboro Victory," leaflet, ca. April 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; *DW*, April 2, 24, 1935; see also *SW*, May 1935.

14 *DW*, January 22, 24, 1935; J. L. LeFlore to Walter White, July 13, 1935, Box G-4, NAACP Papers, Branch Files.

15 Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 345–47; Cicero Hughes, "Toward a Black United Front," 91–93; Streater, "The National Negro Congress"; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 457; Wittner, "The National Negro Congress"; John P. Davis, *Let Us Build a National Negro Congress*; NNC, *Official Proceedings*, 1, 29–30; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 182; James W. Ford, "The National Negro Congress," *Communist* 15 (April 1936): 325–27.

16 James Ford and A. W. Berry, "The Coming National Negro Congress," *Communist* 15 (February 1936): 142; see also A. W. Berry, "Southern Toilers and the National Negro Congress," *South Today* 1 (April-May 1936): 14–15; Charles McPherson to Walter White, December 17, 1935, White to McPherson, December 28, 1935, Box

G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; John P. Davis to James W. Ashford, November 16, 1935, Ashford to Davis, November 14, 1935, NNC Papers, reel 2. For biographical background on James Ashford, see *DW*, September 21, 1936; *YW*, October 10, 1932; *Young Communist Review* 1 (October 1936): 2; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 135.

17 Tom Burke [Clyde Johnson] to John P. Davis, December 28, 1935, and John P. Davis to Anna Bogue, December 11, 1935, NNC Papers, reel 2; NNC, *Official Proceedings*, 1, 3, 39; “National Negro Congress,” Birmingham, November 6, 1941, sect. 4, FBI File 100–63; “National Negro Congress,” Birmingham, January 9, 1941, sect. 1, FBI File 100–154; “National Negro Congress,” Birmingham, January 19, 1941, sect. 1, FBI File 100–63; “National Negro Congress,” Birmingham, February 1, 1941, sect. 1, FBI File 100–1524.

18 Charles McPherson to Walter White, November 24, 1936, E. W. Taggart to Walter White, March 2, 1936 (telegram); White to Taggart, March 3, 1936; Taggart to White, March 9, 1936; Charles McPherson to Walter White, December 2, 1936; all in Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; *SW*, March–April 1936; “Birmingham Branch President Arrested,” *Crisis* 43 (April 1936): 118.

19 E. W. Taggart to Walter White, March 9, 1936, Box G-2, NAACP Papers,. Branch Files.

20 Hall quotation from Robert F. Hall, “Those Southern Liberals,” 490; comment about Hall from *DW*, May 27, 1938; Rob Hall interview with author; Hall, “Recollections of a Cub Reporter.” See also Robert F. Hall interview by Theodore Draper, August 16, 1971, p. 1, Draper Papers (Emory); Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 310–11; Scales and Nickson, *Cause at Heart*, 78.

21 Rob Hall interview with author, September 19, 1987; *DW*, March 26, 28, 29, 1932; Wechsler, *Revolt on the Campus*, 100–105; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 310–11. When Hall first arrived in Alabama he used the pseudonym “Bill Moseley.”

22 “Testimony of Jack Barton [Bart Logan],” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:759–63; “Statement of Belle Barton [Belle Logan], December 7, 1936,” *ibid.*, 973; *DW*, November 25, 1936; Marge Frantz interview with author.

23 David Kinkead, Assistant Secretary, NCDPP, to Governor Bibb Graves, telegram, July 30, 1935; Editors of *New Masses* to Governor Graves, July 30, 1935; Bruce Crawford et al. to Governor Bibb Graves, July 30, 1935; all in Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 3; “Statement of Alfred Hirsch, January 7, 1937,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:976–77; *Birmingham Post*, July 29, 1935; *DW*, July 25, 31, August 1, 6, 10, 21, 1935; Crawford, “Bullets

Fell on Alabama”; Jack Conroy, “Reception in Alabama,” *Labor Defender* 11 (September 1935): 9, 21; *ACLU Weekly Bulletin* 675 (August 9, 1935): 2; *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 18, 1935; Ingalls, “Antiradical Violence,” 525–26. The delegation consisted of Jack Conroy, Alfred Hirsch, Shirley Hopkins, Emmet Gowen, and Bruce Crawford.

24 Amendment quoted in *DW*, February 8, 1935; “To the Workers and Farmers of Alabama, The Sedition Bill Declares War on the Labor Unions ...” leaflet, ca. February 1935, official’s quotation from Justice of the Peace of Trafford, Alabama, to Governor Graves (unsigned), June 13, 1935, and Charles H. S. Houk, pastor, Edgewood Presbyterian Church, to Governor Graves, July 1, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Editorial, *Montgomery Advertiser*, February 1, 1935; Minutes of Meeting of Board of Directors, ACLU, February 11, 1935, ACLU Records, reel 5; Dothan (Alabama) *Eagle*, quoted in *ACLU Weekly Bulletin* 678 (August 30, 1935): 2. On labor’s support for the bill, see Resolution from Local 5928, UMWA, Kimberly, Alabama, February 1, 1935, L. C. Lowery, president, Bessemer Trades Council, et al. to Governor Graves, March 26, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; *DW*, February 13, 1935.

25 “To the Workers and Farmers of Alabama, The Sedition Bill Declares War on the Labor Unions ...” leaflet, ca. February 1935; Resolution from “800 White and Negro Workers, Birmingham, Alabama,” February 20, 1935; Working Women Club No. 1 of Woodlawn to Governor Graves, n.d.; Resolution from Peace Baptist Church, Powderley, Alabama, February 17, 1935; Resolution from the Church of Christ, February 19, 1935; Resolution from Rev. J. H. Thomas, Friendship Baptist Church, Birmingham, March 14, 1935; Resolution from Mt. Sinai Baptist Church, n.d.; Resolution from Woodlawn Sunday School, n.d.; Resolution from Rev. G. W. Reed, Forty Fifth Street Baptist Church, March 11, 1935; Resolution from St. John Sunday School, February 17, 1935; Resolution from St. John BYPU, February 17, 1935; Willing Workers Club, secretary Cassier McFair, n.d.; Resolution from the Stick Together Club, signed J. W. Wooten, Orrville, Alabama, February 19, 1935; Resolution from the Adult Club, Powderley, Alabama, February 17, 1935; all in Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers.

26 *ACLU Weekly Bulletin* 675 (August 9, 1935): 2; *DW*, August 5, 19, 20, 1935. Because Graves vetoed the bill two days past the deadline, it temporarily became law. However, popular opposition forced Alabama legislators to repeal the law a few weeks later (Governor Bibb Graves to D. H. Turner, Secretary of State, August 16, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; *ACLU Weekly Bulletin* 679

[September 6, 1935]: 2).

27 Belfrage, "Dixie Detour," 375; Cowett, *Birmingham's Rabbi*, 140; "Testimony of Joseph Gelders," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:772–73; *Birmingham Post*, September 25, 1936; *Birmingham News*, September 26, 1936; Gelders, "Professor, How Could You?" 97; Marge Frantz interview with author; Marge Frantz to author, May 19, 1989.

28 Marge Frantz interview with author. Because sympathetic Southern intellectuals found it difficult to make local contacts with the Party, traveling to New York was not uncommon. Don West, a white, Georgia-born theologian who joined in 1934 traveled to New York on his motorcycle in order to talk to Clarence Hathaway. He was immediately invited to attend the Workers School (*DW*, June 11, 1934; Marge Frantz interview with author; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 50; Painter, *Narrative*, 204–6 [West is identified as "Jim Gray" in the *Narrative*]; Kester interview [SOHP], 32). Similarly, Socialist theologian Howard Kester went to New York to talk directly with Earl Browder, but Kester came away with very negative feelings toward the CP (Kester interview [SOHP], 25–26).

29 Marge Frantz interview with author; *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:772–73; Gelders, "Professor, How Could You?" 97; Joseph Gelders to Roger N. Baldwin, August 14, vol. 826, ACLU Papers; Memorandum re: Joseph Gelders from S. K. McKee to J. Edgar Hoover, January 13, 1942, FBI HQ File 61–9512; Letter from Marge Frantz to author, May 19, 1989.

30 Marge Frantz interview with author; "Testimony of Joseph Gelders" *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:774; quotation from Belfrage, "Dixie Detour," 375; Minutes of Board of Directors, September 29, 1936, ACLU Records, reel 6.

31 *DW*, January 21, March 22, April 5, 6, 1936; *SW*, February 1936; "Statement on Police Raid," prepared by Anne Johnson, 1936, CJP, reel 13; "Statement of Emily Mabel Owen, December 28, 1936," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:962–63; "Statement of Jesse Green Owen, December 28, 1936," *ibid.*, 964.

32 *Birmingham News*, July 20, 1936; "Testimony of Jack Barton [Bart Logan]," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:764–66; "Statement of Belle Barton [Belle Logan], December 7, 1936," *ibid.*, 974; The State of Alabama, Judicial Department, the Alabama Court of Appeals, October term, 1936–1937 (6 Div. 74), *Ex parte Jack Barton v. City of Bessemer*, appeal from Jefferson Circuit Court, November 10, 1936, *ibid.* 957–58; ACLU, *Weekly Bulletin* 741 (November 27, 1936): 1; "Memo on Case of Jack Barton at Bessemer, Ala." n.d. [1936], vol. 924, ACLU Papers; quotation from "Testimony of Joseph Gelders," *La*

33 “Statement of Belle Barton [Belle Logan], December 7, 1936,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:975; Joseph Gelders to Roger N. Baldwin, September 21, 1936, vol. 924, ACLU Papers; *Birmingham Post*, September 25, 1936; Marge Frantz interview with author; “Testimony of Joseph Gelders,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:777–83; “Statement by Joseph S. Gelders,” September 24, 1936, ILD Papers, reel 11; *Birmingham News*, September 24, 1936; Ingalls, “Antiradical Violence,” 526–27.

34 ACLU Press Release, “Rewards Offered in Alabama Flogging Case,” September 25, 1936, ACLU Records, reel 6; ACLU *Weekly Bulletin* 733 (October 2, 1936): 2; *Montgomery Advertiser*, September 26, 1936; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, September 25, 1936; *Birmingham News*, September 25, 1936; Belle Barton [Logan], “Things Happen in Alabama,” *Labor Defender* 10 (December 1936): 10; “Testimony of Joseph Gelders,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:874–76; and see dozens of protest letters in folder “Re: Joseph Gelders,” Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; *Birmingham Post*, November 14, 18, 1936; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, November 17, 1936; *Birmingham News*, January 5, 1937; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, January 6, 1937; *Birmingham Post*, January 6, 1937; *DW*, January 11, 1937; ACLU *Weekly Bulletin* 741 (November 27, 1936): 1. Two of Gelders's assailants, Walter Hanna and Dent Williams (the same man who shot Willie Peterson five years earlier), had records of antilabor violence. Hanna was a paid employee of the TCI, apparently serving as a secret investigator collecting information on labor activities (*Birmingham News*, October 20, 21, 23, 1936; “Testimony of Carey E. Haigler,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:802–3; “Testimony of Yelverton Cowherd,” *ibid.*, 803–6; Ingalls, “Antiradical Violence,” 533–34).

35 *Birmingham Post*, November 18, 1936; *Alabama*, January 25, 1937, p. 1.

36 “Testimony of J. W. McClung,” *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:792; Auerbach, *Labor and Liberty*, 94–95; Ingalls, “Antiradical Violence,” 537, 542; Minutes of Board of Directors, February 1, 1937, ACLU Records, microfilm, reel 6. In March 1937, TCI signed a contract with the CIO's Steel Workers Organizing Committee, which ultimately led to a decline in company-sponsored antiradical violence. (See Chapter 7).

37 *DW*, November 13, 14, 25, 1936; *Jack Barton v. City of Bessemer*, 173 So. 626, (1937), *Alabama Reports*, 234:20–24; The State of Alabama, Judicial Department, the Alabama Court of Appeals, October term, 1936–37 (6 Div. 74), *Ex parte Jack Barton v. City of Bessemer*, appeal from Jefferson Circuit Court, November 10, 1936, *La*

Follette Committee Hearings, 3:957; Coker et al., *Digest of the Public Record of Communism*, 266; quotation from Anna Damon, "The Struggle against Criminal Syndicalist Laws," *Communist* 16 (March 1937): 284; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 186–206.

38 Kling, "Making the Revolution," 27–78, 88, 287–88, 308–28; Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 19–20; *SW*, December 1936; and for changes in the Party's rural work, see Chapter 9.

39 CPUSA, "National Membership Report, January 1-June 30, 1937," mimeo, Box 1, Draper Papers (Emory); also cited in Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 380. In 1936 the Party's thirty-five districts received a total of \$25,548.14, averaging \$729.95 per district. In 1937 District 17 received \$3,057.64 out of a total district subsidy of \$31,979.92 (*DW*, May 31, 1938). Personal recollections also support the contention that black membership declined significantly during the Popular Front (Marge Frantz interview with author; James Jackson interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; and Hudson interview with author).

40 *SW*, April 1937. On Alabamians in the Spanish Civil War, see *DW*, November 1, 1937; D. E McKinnon, "Southerners Fight for Democracy in Spain," *New South* 1 (August 1938): 11; Marge Frantz interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview with author. Coad was working in North Carolina under the name "Mack Johnson" when he decided to go to Spain (Crouch, "Brief History of the Communist Movement in North and South Carolina," 7).

41 Quotation from *SW*, September 1937; Rob F. Hall, "Confessions of a Communist," *New South* 1 (November 1937): 2; Hall interview with author; Marge Frantz interview with author; FBI Report on Laurent Frantz, Birmingham Division, May 19, 1941, p. 2, HQ File 100–20023; Painter, *Narrative*, 246; "In the Heart of Alabama," *Labor Defender* 11 (December 1937): 13; advertisement in *New South* 1 (November 1937): 11; *DW*, October 25, 1937; Ballam, "The First All-Southern CP Conference," 14; Laurent Frantz interview with author. By 1938, Speed had left Alabama and Mary Southard had taken over the bookstore (J. Edgar Hoover to Special Agent in Charge, Birmingham, Alabama, January 17, 1941, "Southern Negro Youth Congress," FBI File 100–82).

42 Ballam, "The First All-Southern CP Conference," 13–14; *DW*, September 27, 1937; Browder, *People's Front*, 248.

43 Delegates quoted in Ballam, "The First All-Southern CP Conference," 15; second quotation from Paul Crouch, "Broken Chains," chap. 23, p. 1, Box 1. Paul Crouch Papers; *New South* 1 (June 1938). A year later Rob Hall declared unequivocally that "the *New*

South . . . was not a Communist magazine.” (Hall to Joe Gelders, November 9, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers).

44 Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 273; Polenberg, *Fighting Faiths*, 243.

45 John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era*, chap. 1; Sosna, *In Search of the Silent South*; quotation from *SW*, September 1937; Collier, “The Solid South Cracks,” 185; *New South* 1 (March 1938): 4, 6.

46 NAACP Membership Report, Birmingham Branch, March 30, 1937, Box G-3, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; *SW*, September 1937; “The Negro People and the People's Front,” *New South* 1 (March 1938): 6–7; Hudson interview with author; quotation from Painter, *Narrative*, 271–72.

47 Harold Preece, “Folk Music of the South,” *New South* 1 (March 1938): 13; *DW*, January 17, 1938; quotation from CPUSA, *Proceedings—10th Convention*, 298; Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, 192; see also Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 211–19 for a brilliant discussion of the “Americanization” of African-American music.

48 *SW*, July 1936; Hall interview with author; quotation from *SW*, January 1937; “Southern Methodist Conference Votes for Church Unity,” *New South* 1 (June 1938): 7. The Central Committee strongly encouraged church membership during the Democratic Front. See especially, CPUSA, *Proceedings—10th Convention*, 298; CPUSA, “Party Building: Resolution Adopted by Tenth National Convention of the Communist Party, USA, May 26–31, 1938,” mimeo, 1938, Browder Papers, reel 3; Negro Commission, “Report on Negro Work: Material for the Negro Commission, 10th Party Convention,” mimeo, May 1938, Box 12, Minor Papers; Painter, *Narrative*, 269–70; Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, 192.

49 Robert F. Hall, “Establishing the Party in the South,” 28–29.

50 *DW*, January 19, May 27, 1938; T. Spralding, “About a Branch in the South”; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 380; song quoted in *DW*, May 11, 1938; *DW*, December 13, 23, 1937; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 245.

51 Memo from Margaret Cowl, Director of Women's Commission, Central Committee to All District Women's Commission, July 1937, Browder Papers, reel 3; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author. Although Hosea Hudson claims he tried to persuade his wife to accompany him to meetings (Painter, *Narrative*, 115–16), Esther

Cooper Jackson remembers that Hudson, Henry O. Mayfield (in the case of his first wife), and others never included their spouses.

52 DW, May 11, 1938; also Hall interview with author; Marge Frantz interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Robert F. Hall, "Establishing the Party in the South," 29.

53 Painter, *Narrative*, 244–45, 247–48; Hudson interview with author.

CHAPTER SEVEN

1 DW, March 9, 12, 1935; Research Committee, "Thunder in the South," *South Today* 1 (December 1935-January 1936): 13; SW, June 1935; DW, June 25, 1935; Vern Smith, "Victory Achieved in Alabama Coal Strike," *International Press Correspondence* (December 28, 1935): 1748; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 92–93.

2 *Labor Advocate*, January 11, February 22, 1936; see also *ibid.*, March 7, 21, April 18, May 30, 1936. On the Party's role in the WPA strikes, see Chapter 8.

3 DW, February 5, 1938; Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue," 245, 456; Kling, "Making the Revolution," 340; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 223–30, 243–44; Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 136–37; Levenstein, *Communism, Anti-Communism and the CIO*.

4 SW, March-April 1936; *Birmingham News*, April 29, 30, 1936; SW, May 1936; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, April 30, 1936; Hall interview with author. When James Neal, an organizer for the United Textile Workers of America who had never been a Communist, opposed the anti-Communist resolution as a violation of free speech, he was physically beaten by a group of delegates.

5 W. O. Hare to William Green, March 1, 1937, Box 1, Taft Papers; Mitch quoted in Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 121; *Labor Advocate*, April 24, June 12, 1937; see also *Labor Advocate*, June 19, 26, July 3, 10, 17, 24, 31, August 7, 21, 28, September 4, 18, 1937; *Southern Labor Review*, September 8, 1937.

6 Phillips, "History of the United Rubber Workers," 23, 35–43, 47–48; Charles Martin, "Southern Labor Relations in Transition," 553–56; SW, September 1936; *Gadsden Times*, June 12, 25, 1936; DW, December 5, 1936; Gadsden Central Labor Union, *Report of a Citizen's Committee*, 10–15; Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 188–89; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 116–18.

7 Gadsden Central Labor Union, *Report of a Citizen's Committee*, 7;

Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 119; Karam quoted in Gadsden *Times*, June 20, 1937; see also Phillips, "History of the United Rubber Workers," 50; Charles Martin, "Southern Labor Relations in Transition," 561–63.

8 Quoted in Gadsden Central Labor Union, *Report of a Citizen's Committee*, 31; "Resolution of Gadsden Law and Order Committee," signed by J. F. Morgan and Walter M. Pearson, August 5, 1937, Box 127, Black Papers; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson interview with author. Fish Committee testimony and reports from the Birmingham *Age-Herald* made claims in 1930 that the Communists had been organizing Gadsden workers, but there is no evidence of such activity in Party sources (*Fish Committee Hearings*, 1(6): 178–79).

9 *Southern Labor Review*, June 30, 1937; Freeman quoted in Gadsden Central Labor Union, *Report of a Citizen's Committee*, 34; Marge Frantz interview with author; Charles Martin, "Southern Labor Relations in Transition," 567–68.

10 Birmingham *Post*, June 9, 1936; Patton interview (BPRM), 4.

11 Norrell, "Caste in Steel," 671; Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 185; SW, November 1936; Hall interview with author; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 103, 105–10.

12 *Southern Labor Review*, January 20, 1937; Shaw quoted in Bunche, "A Brief and Tentative Analysis of Negro Leadership," 135, CMS Collection; Hall interview with author. Shaw also spoke at several SWOC-CIO meetings; see Birmingham *World*, June 20, 1941; BWDS (Notebooks). For more on black middle-class support for the CIO, see Emory O. Jackson interview (CRDP), 8; NAACP, Birmingham Branch, *Advancement* (Birmingham, 1941), pamphlet in Box C-1, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Coke interview with author.

13 Hudson quotation from BWDS (Notebooks); Painter, *Narrative*, 247–51; John Williams, "Struggles of the Thirties in the South," 175–76; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, December 22, 1938; Frederick Cox interview (WLC), 4; Hudson interview with author; Hudson, "Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles," 35; Mayfield quotation from Mayfield, "Memoirs," 53; worker's quotation from Parham and Robinson, " 'If I Could Go Back ...,' " 233.

14 Battle interview (BPRM), 3; Dean interview (BPRM), 2–3, 4; Andrews interview (WLC), 9–18; George Brown interview (BPRM), 1–2. During and after World War II, however, after skilled, relatively conservative whites left the company unions and seized control of the CIO, the union was used as a lever to hinder black upward mobility in steel (Norrell, "Caste in Steel").

15 Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 185–86; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 104–5; *Alabama*, January 4, 11, 1937, 6; BWDS (Notebooks); Painter,

16 Painter, *Narrative*, 247; Hudson interview with author; *Alabama*, February 15, 1937; "Birmingham Stove and Range Company, Birmingham, Alabama, Strike—February 4, 1937," Dispute Case Files (1935–39), Alabama Department of Labor Records; *Alabama*, February 15, March 8, 15, 1937; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 105.

17 Northrup, "The Negro and Unionism in Birmingham," 35; Marshall, *Labor in the South*, 186; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 107; Traver de Vyver, "Present Status of Labor Unions in the South," 489. With the exception of the two sit-down strikes mentioned above, the steel mills operated without any major (reported) labor disputes. See Alabama Department of Industrial Relations, *Annual Report, 1938–1939*, 54–58; Alabama Department of Labor, *Annual Report, 1938*, 26–32; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 106–9.

18 Jensen, *Nonferrous Metals Industry Unionism*, 53; Cochran, *Labor and Communism*, 149–50; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 236–37.

19 Noel R. Beddow to Mercedes Daugherty, secretary to Philip Murray, July 27, 1943, Box 1, Taft Papers; Testimony of Homer D. Wilson, U.S. Congress, Senate, *Communist Domination of Union Officials*, 134–36; Marge Frantz interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Hall interview with author; Hudson interview with author; Thomas interview (WLC), 8–9.

20 Testimony of Homer D. Wilson, U.S. Congress, Senate, *Communist Domination of Union Officials*, 135–36.

21 *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, January 12, 1939.

22 William Mitch to Aubrey Williams, telegram, July 23, 1936, C. L. Pagues, Secretary Treasurer, District 5, International Union of Mine Mill and Smelter Workers to Hugo Black, July 8, 1936, Box 784, WPA Records; Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners," 90–91; Regensburger, "The Emergence of Industrial Unionism," 100–110; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 112–14.

23 *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, September 14, 1939; Huntley, "Iron Ore Miners," 94–98; Huntley, "The Rise and Fall of Mine Mill," 5; Regensburger, "The Emergence of Industrial Unionism," 101; Taft, *Organizing Dixie*, 113–15; interview with Members of Mine Mill Smelter Workers, CIO, conducted by George Stoney, 1940, pp. 1, 6, Box 83, Bunche Papers. Mine Mill did not win complete recognition from TCI until 1941.

24 Prickett, "Communists and the Communist Issue," 456; see also Kling, "Making the Revolution," 340; Buhle, *Marxism in the United States*, 152–53; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home*, 140–46.

25 Hudson interview with author; Hall interview with author.

26 Interview with Members of Mine Mill Smelter Workers, CIO, conducted by George Stoney, 1940, p. 7, Box 83, Bunche Papers; *DW*, December 5, 1937; Hudson interview with author; Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," 44; *SNA*, June 5, 1941.

27 Hudson interview with author.

28 Hudson, "Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles," 35; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, December 22, 1938; Cox interview (WLC), 4.

29 Interview with Mine Mill Smelter Workers, CIO, 1940, p. 7 (quotation from p. 2), Box 83, Bunche Papers; Benson interview (WLC), 2; Earl Brown interview (WLC), 9.

30 McGill interviews (BPRM), 2; Holston interview (WLC), 1–4; Anderson Underwood quoted in McCallum, "Songs of Work and Songs of Worship," 23; Korson, *Coal Dust on the Fiddle*, 306–9.

31 *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, February 16, 1939.

32 Highlander Folk School, "Songs of Field and Factory," 12, 15.

33 McGill interviews (BPRM), 12. On the use of popular songs on picket lines, see Denisoff, *Sing A Song*, 24.

34 Highlander Folk School, "Songs of Field and Factory."

CHAPTER EIGHT

1 Douglas L. Smith, *New Deal in the Urban South*, 86, 91; "Minutes of Conference Held at Gay-Teague hotel, July 12, 1935, with Representatives of Organized Labor in Alabama, in Connection with the Program and Problems of the Works Progress Administration under the New Set-Up," Box 784, WPA Records; Fred R. Smith, Director of Labor Management to Thad Holt, October 22, 1935, and H. J. Adcox to President Franklin D. Roosevelt, September 16, 1935, Box 784, WPA Records; *DW*, September 16, 1935.

2 *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 27, 29, 1935; leaflet issued by Montgomery Unemployed Council, "Organize for Decent Wages and Conditions on Jobs and for Direct Relief," ca. August 1935, CJP, reel 13; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 1; *DW*, October 2, 1935.

3 WPA foreman quoted in John M. Tillery to President Roosevelt, September 1935, Women's Auxiliary, Local 719 [Hod Carriers] to Mrs. Roosevelt, September 2, 1935, Box 784, WPA Records; *DW*, July 22, 1935; "Minutes of Conference Held at Gay-Teague hotel, July 12, 1935. . . , " Box 784, WPA Records; *DW*, September 16, 20, 24, 1935. See also Clayton Norris to Harry Hopkins, telegram, September 20, 1935; Clayton Norris to J. W. Garvey, September 19, 1935; Nels Anderson, Director of Labor Relations to Thad Holt, September 21, 1935; WPA official quoted in Memorandum from Dean R. Brimhall to Harry Hopkins, September 14, 1935, "re: Reported WPA Strike"; all in Box 784, WPA Records.

4 Fred Smith, Director of Labor Management to Clayton Norris, September 25, 1935, and ACLU to Governor Bibb Graves, October 17, 1935, Box 784, WPA Records; *DW*, October 12, 1935.

5 "Closed File, General Strike WPA Jefferson County, April 15, 1936," p. 1, Container SG 4191, Dispute Case Files, Alabama Department of Labor Records; *SW*, May 1936; "Statement by Kenneth Bridenthal, January 12, 1937," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:970. The total number of strikers included some two hundred Public Works Administration (PWA) workers who were not affected by the order but chose to join the strike as an act of solidarity.

6 "Closed File, General Strike WPA Jefferson County, April 15, 1936," p. 2, Container SG 4191, Dispute Case Files, Alabama Department of Labor Records; "Statement by Kenneth Bridenthal, January 12, 1937," *La Follette Committee Hearings*, 3:970; "Statement by Harriet Flood, January 12, 1937," *ibid.*, 971–73; "Statement of Belle Barton [Logan]," *ibid.*, 973–74; *SW*, May 1936; Alabama Department of Labor, *Annual Report, 1935–1936*, 19.

7 *SW*, June 1936. See also W. J. Bennet to Thad Holt, August 14, 1936; Clarence W. McGullough to President Roosevelt, April 6, 1936; Jim Manning to Nels Anderson, Director, Section on Labor Relations, July 30, 1936; Elmer Wood, Local 719 International Hod Carriers to President Roosevelt, March 16, 1936; Mrs. Grady Patmon to President Roosevelt, January 20, 1936; Circular from North Alabama WPA Workers Local Union No. 1, September 30, 1936; quotation from unsigned letter to Labor Policies Board, November 5, 1936; all in Box 784, WPA Records.

8 *Labor Advocate*, March 7, 21, 1936; "Hosea Hudson interview, November 18, 1939," in R. J. Bunche, "Field Notes—Southern Trip, Book IV," n.d., 44, Box 82, Bunche Papers; Hudson interview with author; *SW*, January 1936; "Resolution of the Amalgamated Association of State and United States Government Relief Workers of North America, April 1, 1937, and Resolution of the Amalgamated ..."

April 12, 1937, Box 786, WPA Records.

9 Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 295–97; Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 75–76.

10 Painter, *Narrative*, 283; Hudson interview with author; and see, for instance, Claude Lambert, Recording Secretary, Workers Alliance of America, Local #1 to Franklin D. Roosevelt, October 1, 1936, Box 784, WPA Records. In Mobile in September 1936, however, the Workers Alliance held a mass demonstration of three hundred unemployed and WPA workers to demand wage increases in relief and WPA work (Workers Alliance of America, Mobile Branch to Harry Hopkins, telegram, September 4, 1936, Box 784, WPA Records).

11 Painter, *Narrative*, 284–88; John Williams, “Struggles of the Thirties in the South,” 176–77; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 58–62; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, February 2, 1939; “Interview with Hosea Hudson,” November 18, 1939, p. 44, Box 82, Bunche Papers. In Painter, *Narrative* (282–83), Donovan is referred to as “John Buckley” and James D. Howell is referred to as “Tom Howard.”

12 BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 62; “Interview with Hosea Hudson,” November 18, 1939, in R. J. Bunche, “Field Notes,” 44, Box 82, Bunche Papers.

13 DW, July 26, 1938; Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 69; BWDS (Notebooks); John Williams, “Struggles of the Thirties in the South,” 177; DW, February 22, 1938.

14 James Hood, Secretary and Treasurer of the Workers Alliance, Bessemer Union Local #1 to Harry Hopkins, June 24, 1938, Box 786, WPA Records; *New South* 1 (August 1938): 5; BWDS (Notebooks); Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 63–65.

15 Herbert Benjamin, “After a Decade of Mass Unemployment,” *Communist* 19 (March 1940): 264; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 297; BWDS (Notebooks); quotation from Beulah Banks to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, February 23, 1938, Box 786, WPA Records.

16 U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census, 1940: The Labor Force*, 3(1): 44. See also Lillian Bell to President Roosevelt, March 20, 1938; Rossie Barrington to President Roosevelt, January 28, 1938; Beulah Banks to Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt, February 23, 1938; all in Box 786, WPA Records. By 1940, all of Alabama's cities combined employed only 1,273 black women on WPA projects (U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Sixteenth Census, 1940: Population*, 2(1): 226).

17 Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 89–90; “Interview with Hosea Hudson,” November 18, 1939, in R. J. Bunche, “Field Notes,” 44, Box 82, Bunche Papers; Painter, *Narrative*, 298–99.

18 Earl J. Ball, Secretary of the Workers Alliance, Etowah County to Ernest L. Marbury, Acting Director, Division of Employment, WPA, December 1, 1939, Resolution of the Gadsden United WPA Workers, June 28, 1940, signed by John F. Morgan, Clarence Tucker, Dennis Huff, and J. C. Belyeu, Box 789, WPA Records; quotation from BWDS (Notebooks); Painter, *Narrative*, 300–301; Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 70.

19 See Piven and Cloward, *Poor People's Movements*, 91; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 269–73; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 303–4.

CHAPTER NINE

1 SW, August 15, 1933; Draft Resolution for District Convention, District 17 (1934), 5, Browder Papers, reel 3; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Clyde Johnson interview by H. L. Mitchell, 14–26; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 53–54.

2 See especially Naison, “Black Agrarian Radicalism,” 55–56.

3 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Murphy to Painter, March 1978. pp. 28–29, NPHH Collection; Al Murphy, “The Share Croppers’ Union Grows and Fights,” 48; see also [Al Murphy], “Agrarian Work,” 80–82; [Murphy], Report to Central Committee of CPUSA, June 10, 1933, Box 16, Draper Papers (Emory).

4 Clyde Johnson interview with author.

5 DW, March 21, January 31, 1935, October 1, 1934, March 14, 1935.

6 SW, March–April 1935, May 1935; DW, May 8, June 21, 1935; “To All White and Negro Share Croppers and Tenants and Farm Workers: To All White and Negro Farm Women and Youth,” n.d., encl., Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1; Rosen, “The Alabama Share Croppers’ Union,” 66.

7 Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1.

8 DW, May 24, 1935, June 4, 12, 21, 1935, July 2, 1935; SW, June 1935; Robert Wood [Charles Sherrill] to Governor Bibb Graves, May 21, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; quotation from “Statement of Robert Washington, December 21, 1936,” *La Follette*

Committee Hearings, 3:965–66; BWDS (Notebooks); Painter, *Narrative*, 187–88; Rosen, “The Alabama Share Croppers’ Union,” 66.

9 Quotation from *DW*, May 25, 1935; *DW*, May 15, 20, 25, 1935; Robert Wood [Charles Sherrill] to Governor Bibb Graves, May 18, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers.

10 *DW*, June 21, 1935; *SW*, June 1935; *DW*, May 30, June 21, 1935; “To All White and Negro Share Croppers and Tenants and Farm Workers: To All White and Negro Farm Women and Youth,” n.d., encl., Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1; *Union Leader*, July 4, 1935; Rosen, “The Alabama Share Croppers’ Union,” 65.

11 Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], “The Murder of Joe Spinner,” *New Masses* 12 (September 3, 1935): 21, 22; Jack Martin and E. Selridge, Thurston County, Washington, Unemployment Council to Governor Graves, September 15, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers.

12 For background on the STFU, see Dyson, *Red Harvest*, chap. 8; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*; Harry L. Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 88–110; Thrasher and Wise, “The Southern Tenant Farmers’ Union.”

13 *DW*, October 16, 1934; *SW*, December 1934, January 1935; Ross, “Some Problems of the Class Struggle,” 72; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 55; U.S. Congress, Senate, *Alleged Communistic Activities at Howard University*, 13–36, 55; *DW*, May 20, June 1, 4, 1935; Mitchell quoted in *DW*, May 20, 1935.

14 Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1; quotation from Mitchell interview (COHP), “The Reminiscences of H. L. Mitchell,” 53; H. L. Mitchell to Jack Herling, August 24, 1935, and H. L. Mitchell, “Report-Sharecroppers Union of Alabama,” n.d., STFU Papers, reel 1; H. L. Mitchell to Norman Thomas, August 4, 1935, and Mitchell to Howard Kester, August 3, 1935, Kester Papers, reel 1; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 81; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 102–3; Mitchell, *Mean Things Happening*, 80–81; *Sharecroppers Voice*, August 1935; *DW*, August 14, 1935; H. L. Mitchell to Clarence Senior, September 9, 1935, SPA Papers, reel 126.

15 *DW*, July 22, 1935; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], “A Statement on the Terror Against the Cotton Pickers’ Strike—Share Croppers’ Union,” circular letter, August 27, 1935, “Support the Cotton Pickers Strike!” leaflet, 1935, CJP, reel 13; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to J. R. Butler, July 4, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1; *DW*, July 31, August 2, 1935; “Organize for Decent Wages and Conditions on Jobs and for Direct Relief,” leaflet, 1935, CJP, reel 13;

Burke [Clyde Johnson], "We Told Washington," 649; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 1; *Montgomery Advertiser*, August 27, 29, 1935; *DW*, September 25, 1935.

16 *DW*, August 7, 8, 26, September 3, 16, 1935 (quotation from August 8, 1935); Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "You Can Kill Me," 6; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "A Statement on the Terror against the Cotton Pickers' Strike," CJP, reel 13; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to Governor Bibb Graves, August 25, 1935, and Horace B. Davis to Governor Bibb Graves, October 9, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Lemon Johnson interview with author; Smith interview with author.

17 *DW*, September 3, 16, 1935; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to Governor Bibb Graves, August 25, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "A Statement on the Terror against the Cotton Pickers' Strike," CJP, reel 13; Charles A. J. McPherson to Walter White, February 13, 1936, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "You Can Kill Me" 6; "Written in Blood," *Labor Defender* 11 (November 1935): 4.

18 *DW*, September 9, 10, 16, 1935; *Birmingham Post*, October 12, 1935; *Union Leader*, September 28, 1935; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "You Can Kill Me," 6; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 12; Lemon Johnson interview with author; Preece, "Epic of the Black Belt," 92; and for details on Watkins's murder, see Charles A. J. McPherson to Walter White, February 13, 1936, Box G-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files. See also Emzie Watkins to Harry Hopkins, March 24, 1936; Statement of Emzie Watkins submitted to WPA, January 23, 1936; Statement of Pauline Watkins, January 23, 1936; all in Box 785, WPA Records.

19 *DW*, September 3, 16, 1935; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to Governor Bibb Graves, August 25, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Preece, "Epic of the Black Belt," 92; Burke [Clyde Johnson], "We Told Washington," 649.

20 Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to Governor Bibb Graves, August 25, 1935; International Labor Defense to Governor Bibb Graves and Mayor Gunter, n.d.; E. L. Bolland to Governor Bibb Graves, September 14, 1935; all in Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "A Statement on the Terror Against the Cotton Pickers' Strike," CJP, reel 13; *Montgomery Advertiser*, September 14, 1935; *Montgomery Journal and Times*, September 14,

1935; Clyde Johnson interview with author; *DW*, October 12, 1935; Burke, [Clyde Johnson], "We Told Washington," 650.

21 Resolution "To Gov. Graves, Montgomery Alabama," n.d., Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "On the Alabama Front," *Nation* 141 (September 18, 1935); Lemon Johnson interview with author.

22 *DW*, September 5, 25, 1935; *Union Leader*, September 28, 1935; A. W. Roper, County Agent [Lowndes County] to T. M. Campbell, August 26, 1935. Box 24, CIC Collection; Al Jackson [Clyde Johnson], "It Looks Like War-Torn Belgium," *South Today* 1 (December 1935-January 1936): 12; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 74; Smith interview with author; Lemon Johnson interview with author.

23 "Comrade Larry" [Clyde Johnson], "To Those Who Fell," *Union Leader*, September 28, 1935.

24 See Drawer 103, Folder "Communist Correspondence," Governor Graves Papers; Clyde Johnson interview with author.

25 Burke [Clyde Johnson], "We Told Washington," 649-50; "Written in Blood," *Labor Defender* 11 (November 1935): 4; SCPR, *Civil Rights in the South*, 12; *Union Leader*, October 28, 1935. As a result of the AAA investigations, however, several Tallapoosa landlords were forced to pay back allotments to sharecroppers (*SW*, June 1936).

26 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Clyde Johnson to author, March 6, 1989; quotation from Belfrage, "Dixie Detour," 375.

27 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Rex Pitkin to J. R. Butler, July 10, 1936, STFU Papers, reel 2; Clyde Johnson to author, January 6, 1989; and for more on the Deacons in Louisiana, see Lipsitz, *A Life in the Struggle*, 94-97, 109-10, 114.

28 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Tom Burke to H. L. Mitchell, January 31, 1936, STFU Papers, reel 2; "STFU Convention Proceedings—Official Report of Second Annual Convention, January 3, 4, 5, 1936, Labor Temple, Little Rock," Gardner Jackson to Howard Kester, November 26, 1935, H. L. Mitchell to Gardner Jackson, December 26, 1935, STFU Papers, reel 1.

29 Clyde Johnson to author, April 20, 1988; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 145; Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 134-37; Clarence A. Hathaway, "Let Us Penetrate Deeper into Rural Areas," *Communist* 14, no. 7 (July 1935): 641-60.

30 Tom Burke to H. L. Mitchell, March 2, 1936, STFU Papers, reel 1; *DW*, October 1, 1935; Albert Jackson [Clyde Johnson] to Governor

Bibb Graves, September 24, 1935, Drawer 103, Governor Graves Papers; *SFL*, May 1, 1936; U.S. Congress, House, *Statistics of the Presidential and Congressional Elections . . . 1936*, 1; Clyde Johnson to author, April 20, 1988; Stone, "Agrarian Conflict in Alabama," 519–20.

31 Clyde Johnson interview with author; "For Unity in the South," *SFL*, May 1, 1936.

32 Mitchell quotation from H. L. Mitchell to Donald Henderson, August 12, 1936, also J. R. Butler to Gardner Jackson, July 31, 1936, STFU Papers, reel 2; *Sharecroppers Voice*, August, September 1936; see also Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 83–84; Johnson quotation from Clyde Johnson interview with author, December 21, 1986. Two years later, McKinney and other black leaders criticized the STFU for practicing racial discrimination, for which McKinney was accused of being a Garveyite and briefly expelled. He was eventually reinstated (Mitchell interview [COHP], "Early Life of H. L. Mitchell" 32–34).

33 Clyde Johnson to author, April 20, 1988.

34 C. L. Johnson to G. S. Gravelee, September 5, 1936, and Gravelee to Clyde Johnson, September 16, 1936, CJP, reel 13; *SFL*, August 1936; *DW*, October 23, 1936; *SFL*, November 1936; Clyde Johnson interview with author.

35 *SFL*, January 1937; "Statement on Farm Tenancy by C. L. Johnson and Gordon McIntire," January 6, 1937, CJP, reel 13; *SFL*, April-May 1937.

36 Quotation from Clyde Johnson to J. J. Krai, May 15, 1937, CJP, reel 13; see also criticisms of AFU program in *SFL*, April-May 1937; *SFL*, July 1936; Saul Davis to Clyde Johnson, March 30, 1937, Clyde Johnson to National Board Members and Officers and Alabama Board Members and Officers of the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, ca. April 1937, CJP, reel 13.

37 Clyde Johnson to National Board Members and Officers and Alabama Board Members and Officers of the Farmers' Educational and Cooperative Union of America, ca. April 1937, CJP, reel 13; *Louisiana Farmers' Union News*, April 15, 1937; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, 292; quotation from McKinley Gilbert to Clyde Johnson, July 13, 1937, CJP, reel 13; Clyde Johnson to author, April 20, 1988; *DW*, October 26, 1937.

38 Clyde Johnson to author, April 20, 1988; *DW*, October 26, 1937; *Louisiana Farmers' Union News*, January 15, 1938; Clyde Johnson interview with author; Margery Dallet to John P. Davis, August 4, 1940, Box 24, SCHW Papers.

39 Quotation from Vester Burkett to Gordon McIntire, June 16, 1938, CJP, reel 13.

40 Butler Molette to Clyde Johnson, January 23, 1937; Saul Davis to Clyde Johnson, March 6, 1937; Ollie Johnson to Clyde Johnson, May 23, 1937; see also "Ben" to Clyde Johnson, October 20, 1936; Saul Davis to Clyde Johnson, March 6, 30, 1937; all in CJP, reel 13; on the agricultural extension, see "D" to Clyde Johnson, November 1936, *ibid.*

41 SW, May 1937; *Southern Labor Review*, May 19, 1937; *Birmingham Post*, April 16, 19, 1937; *Labor Advocate*, April 3, 1937; *Rural Worker* 2 (April 1937): 1; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, *Labor Unionism in American Agriculture*, 301; Rosen, "The Alabama Share Croppers' Union," 113.

42 Clyde Johnson interview with author; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 237; Report of District 9, UCAPAWA, December 12, 1938, p. 1, STFU Papers, reel 9; Report to the International Executive Board, UCAPAWA, by Donald Henderson, January 18, 1938, p. 2, STFU Papers, reel 7; *UCAPAWA News* 1, no. 3 (September 1939); Ida Dailes, Office Director, UCAPAWA, to Evelyn Smith, February 10, 1938, STFU Papers, reel 7; Richard Linsley, "Report of District 9, UCAPAWA," December 12, 1938, p. 1, *ibid.*, reel 9. Alabama comprised nearly half of District 9's total membership, which amounted to 3,975 members organized in seventeen locals (Report of Donald Henderson, General President, to the Second Annual Convention of the UCAPAWA, San Francisco, December 12–16, 1938, p. 4, STFU Papers, reel 9).

43 Richard Linsley, "Report of District 9, UCAPAWA," December 12, 1938, pp. 1–2, STFU Papers, reel 9; Richard Linsley, Field Representative, UCAPAWA, to Harry Hopkins, August 16, 1938, Box 787, WPA Records.

44 Confidential Memo, "Report of Preliminary Investigation of Arrest of Willie Joe Hart and Peavey Smith, Dadeville, Alabama," ca. 1940, pp. 1, 4, "Affidavit by Hosie Hart on His Talk with Cliff Corprew, Thursday, September 8, the Morning after the Arrest of His Son," n.d., Box 25, SCHW Papers; Linsley, "Report of District 9, UCAPAWA," December 12, 1938, p. 2, STFU Papers, reel 9.

45 Open letter from Hosea Hart to Claude Wickard, Secretary of Agriculture, printed in *SNA*, February 6, 1941, also *SNA*, March 7 and 23, 1940; *Southern Farmer*, April 1941, p. 9; quotation from *UCAPAWA News* 1, no. 6 (February 1940): 13.

46 Godwin, "Differentials in Out-Migration," 2.

47 For examples of this line of argument, see especially Dyson, *Red Harvest*, 151; Grubbs, *Cry from the Cotton*, 82–84; and Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 533.

CHAPTER TEN

1 Ballam, "Southern Textile Workers," 1035; *DW*, January 19, 1938.

2 Clarence Hathaway, "The 1938 Elections and Our Tasks," *Communist* 17 (March 1938): 216; also Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 207–22.

3 Ballam, "Southern Textile Workers," 1036; see also Donald Burke, "The Right To Vote," *New South* 1 (November 1937).

4 *DW*, January 31, February 1, May 7, August 23, 1938; *New South* 1 (March 1938): 4.

5 Stone interview (SOHP), August 13, 1975, p. 21, and September 10, 1975, pp. 1–4; Circular Letter, "To All Southern Liberals," October 30, 1936, and Minna Abernathy to Olive Stone, November 23, 1937, Box 2, Stone Collection; on Ford's visit to Chapel Hill, see Scales and Nickson, *Cause at Heart*, 59–60.

6 Laurent Frantz interview with author.

7 "Ballad of John Catchings," mimeo, n.d., CJP, reel 13; also in Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, 230–31 (spelled "Catchins"); on the Catchings case, see Gelders, "Professor, How Could You?" 97; Marge Frantz interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author.

8 Circular letter from Joseph Gelders, NCPR, and W. E. Shortridge, NAACP, January 15, 1938, Box 1, Stone Collection; *DW*, February 1, 1938. The federal government initially considered black management, but city commissioner Jimmie Jones would not allow it (Jimmie Jones to Edgar G. Puryear, Personnel Director, Housing Division, Washington, D.C., August 11, 1937, Folder 43, JMJ Papers).

9 *DW*, May 11, 20, 1938.

10 "Report of the Credentials Committee to the 10th National Convention of the Communist Party," typescript, May 1938, p. 8, Browder Papers, reel 3; Painter, *Narrative*, 280–81; *DW*, May 27, 29, 1938; Ford, *The Negro and the Democratic Front*, 190; "Report on Negro

Work: Material for the Negro Commission, 10th Party Convention," typescript, May 1938, p. 1, Box 12, Minor Papers. The *Daily Worker* used pseudonyms for black Alabama Communists: "Larry Brown" was Hosea Hudson; "Frank Curry" was Henry O. Mayfield; and "John Parker" was Hosea Hart.

11 DW, May 13, 1938; Painter, *Narrative*, 273–76, 280.

12 Collier, "The Solid South Cracks," 185; Painter, *Narrative*, 256–60; Hudson interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Hall interview with author.

13 Spralding, "About a Branch in the South," 32; Fred Cox, "The Negro Vote in the South," *New South* 1 (March 1938): 14–15.

14 Painter, *Narrative*, 258; Hudson interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Hall interview with author; Bunche, "The Political Status of the Negro," 2:465; Donald Strong, *Registration of Voters in Alabama*, 14, 54.

15 Bunche, "The Political Status of the Negro," 2:465, 468–70; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 88–89; Donald Strong, *Registration of Voters in Alabama*, 14, 54; Painter, *Narrative*, 259, quotation from p. 261.

16 Bunche, "The Political Status of the Negro," 2:449; Interview with Percy Moore conducted by Joseph Taylor, August 19, 1939, Birmingham, Alabama, p. 7, CMS Collection, reel 5.

17 "Interview, Dr. E. W. Taggart," November 18, 1940, p. 37, in R. J. Bunche, "Field Notes—Southern Trip, Book IV," n.d., typewritten manuscript, Box 82, Bunche Papers; Painter, *Narrative*, 263, 264, 381.

18 Birmingham *Post*, June 16, 1939; Birmingham *News*, July 14, 1939; Bunche, "The Political Status of the Negro," 2:456–58, 470; Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 262–63.

19 "Interview, Hartford Knight," November 18, 1939, p. 44, in R. J. Bunche, "Field Notes—Southern Trip, Book IV," n.d., typewritten manuscript, Box 82, Bunche Papers; Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 263, 268; Bunche, "The Political Status of the Negro," 2:481; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 56; Laurent Frantz interview with author.

20 Earl Browder, "An Historic Report on the South," typescript, ca. 1938, Browder Papers, reel 3; Reed, "The Southern Conference," 17, 25; Sullivan, "Gideon's Southern Soldiers," 24–25.

21 Krueger, *And Promises to Keep*, 3–39; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 187–89; Charles H. Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism," 120–22; Reed, "The Southern Conference," 20–23; Sullivan, "Gideon's Southern Soldiers," 25–60; Robert F. Hall, "The SCHW," 57–59. Most historians argue that Lucy Randolph Mason put

Gelders in touch with Mrs. Roosevelt, but Rob Hall, Gelders's closest collaborator, strongly disagrees. Marge Frantz also corroborates Hall's version (Robert F. Hall, "Those Southern Liberals," 491; Marge Frantz interview with author).

22 Robert F. Hall, "Those Southern Liberals," 491; Charles H. Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism," 120–21; SCHW, *Report of Proceedings*, 13; Robert F. Hall, "The SCHW," 62–63; Reed, "The Southern Conference," 49–52.

23 Robert F. Hall, "Those Southern Liberals," 491; Charles H. Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism," 120–21; SCHW, *Report of Proceedings*, 13; Reed, "The Southern Conference," 32–33; Durr interview (COHP), "The Reminiscences of Virginia Durr," 3:128; Coke interview with author; Hall interview with author.

24 Paul Crouch, "The Southern Conference for Human Welfare," *New South* 1 (January 1939): 7; Robert F. Hall, "The SCHW," 62–63, and "To All Southern Progressive Leaders," *New South* 1 (January 1939): 14.

25 Painter, *Narrative*, 290–91; Hall interview with author; Hudson interview with author.

26 U. S. Congress, House, Special Committee on Un-American Activities, *Investigation*, 7:4482–84, 4765–67; and for a broader discussion of the Dies Committee's impact, see Wreszin, "The Dies Committee, 1938."

27 Mitchell interview (COHP), "The Reminiscences of H. L. Mitchell," 120–22; Howard Kester to Francis Miller, March 19, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers; Charles H. Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism," 124; Durr, *Outside the Magic Circle*, 123.

28 Clarence Poe to Frank Graham, December 10, 1938, and Sallie F. Hill to Clarence Poe, December 10, 1938, Box 10, FPG Papers. See also W. H. Pitts to Jimmie Jones, November 30, 1938, William M. Greenwood, president, Five Points Progressive Club, to J. M. Jones, November 30, 1938; Resolution on SCHW, by Associated White Collar Workers, Council #1, signed by C. O. Hubbard, president, n.d.; White E. Gibson to J. M. Jones, Jr., November 25, 1938; Merrill P. Smith to City Commission, November 25, 1938; W. A. Currie to J. M. Jones, November 25, 1938; Marvin Pearce to Jimmie Jones and Eugene (Bull) Connor, November 26, 1938; W. T. McCurdy to J. M. Jones, November 24, 1938; Jimmie Jones to Joseph Starnes, November 29, 1938; Joe Starnes to J. M. Jones, December 1, 1938; all in Folder 43, JMJ Papers.

29 Charles F. DeBardeleben to Frank Graham, January 2, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers; Hubert Baughn, ed. of *Alabama* to Frank Graham,

December 26, 1938, Box 10, *ibid*; quotation from “Editorial,” *Alabama*, November 13, 1939; and for background on the magazine, see “Interview with Bob Kimsey, Labor and Industrial Reporter, Birmingham, Alabama, conducted by George C. Stoney,” (1940), p. 1, Box 83, Bunche Papers.

30 *Birmingham News*, April 13, 1939; “Interview with Mabel Jones West conducted by George C. Stoney,” (1940), pp. 3–8, Box 83, Bunche Papers; “Wake Up! Southern Men and Women,” AWDG leaflet, ca. 1939, Box C-1, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, February 8, 1940.

31 Frank Graham to Joseph Gelders, January 15, 1940, Box 15, FPG Papers; Francis P. Miller to Graham, December 21, 1938, and Luther Patrick to Graham, December 1, 1938, Box 10, *ibid*; Reed, “The Southern Conference,” 55–58; Charles Martin, “The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism,” 124; Ashby, *Frank Porter Graham*, 158–60; Dunbar, *Against the Grain*, 187–91; Hamilton, *Lister Hill*, 107; Robert F. Hall, “The SCHW,” 65; Hall interview with author; Rob Hall to Louise O. Charlton, February 9, 1939, Charlton to Graham, n.d., Box 12, FPG Papers. A few months later, Graham reported only four Communists (Frank Graham to Francis P. Miller, February 15, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers).

32 Sullivan, “Gideon's Southern Soldiers,” 97–98; James C. Foster, *Union Politics*; Norrell, “Labor at the Ballot Box,” 13–15; Wreszin, “The Dies Committee,” 288–91; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, February 8, 1940, O'Connell quotations from *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, November 10, 1938, and December 8, 1938.

33 *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, August 31, 1939; Hall interview with author; Noel R. Beddow to Congressman Joe Starnes, January 14, 1939, Box 1, Taft Papers; Noel R. Beddow to the Editor, *Birmingham Post*, December 1, 1938, Folder 43, JMJ Papers. Aside from Joe Gelders and other Birmingham Communists, the only influential figure in the labor movement who opposed the expulsion of Communists from the CIO was Charles Stelzle, executive director of a CIO support group called the Good Neighbor Club and writer for the *Southern Labor Review*. By no means sympathetic to Communism, Stelzle argued that the issue of civil liberties was at stake since “many of the workers sincerely believe in the principle of Communism” (*Southern Labor Review*, September 7, 1938).

34 *DW*, September 5, November 5, 1939; Klehr, *Heyday of American Communism*, 386–409; Dennis, *Autobiography*, 133–36; Charney, *A*

Long Journey, 123–24; Jaffe, *Rise and Fall*, 38–48; Naison, *Communists in Harlem*, 287–90.

35 Marge Frantz interview with author; Hall interview with author; Hudson interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Virginia Durr to Frank Graham, n.d. [ca. November 1939], and Joe Gelders to Durr, November 10, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers. See also Roger N. Baldwin to Graham, January 9, 1940; Graham to Gelders, January 15, 1940; Gelders to Graham, January 17, 1940; Frank McAllister to Graham, March 18, May 11, 1940; all in Box 15, FPG Papers; *SNA*, February 29, 1940.

36 Clark Foreman to Graham, March 20, 1940, Box 15, FPG Papers; Charles H. Martin, “The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism,” 125–27; Frank McAllister, “Confidential Report on the Southern Conference for Human Welfare,” April 14, 1940, STFU Papers, reel 14; Marge Frantz interview with author; Krueger, *And Promises to Keep*, 61–63, 91–92.

37 Gelders to Frank Graham, September 20, 1939, Box 31, SCHW Papers; Reed, “The Southern Conference,” 64–67; “Minutes of Executive Board of Southern Conference for Human Welfare, Washington D.C., August 2, 1941,” Box 18, FPG Papers. The Communist office holders in the Alabama Committee for Human Welfare during the 1940s include Pauline Dobbs, Malcolm Dobbs, Mary Southard, Ordway “Spike” Southard, Sam Hall, and Louis Burnham. In Tennessee Marge Frantz was active in the SCHW and edited its journal, the *Southern Patriot*. (See Epilogue.)

38 Eugene Dennis, “The Bolshevization of the Communist Party of the United States in the Struggle against the Imperialist War,” *Communist* 19 (May 1940): 406–7; Browder, *Second Imperialist War*, Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 494–96; Robert F. Hall, “New Forces for Peace,” 702.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

1 Robert F. Hall, “New Forces for Peace”; *SNA*, March 23, September 19, November 7, 1940.

2 *SNA*, January 25, 1940; Marge Frantz interview with author; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Pauline Dobbs to James Dombrowski, October 1, 1945, Box 18, SCHW Papers; Memorandum from S. K. McKee to J. Edgar Hoover, January 13, 1942, re: Joseph Gelders, FBI HQ File 61–9512; Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 83; Hudson interview with author; *SNA*, August 22, 1940.

3 SNA, March 30, April 6, 13, 1940. For a discussion of the radical social gospel in the 1930s, see Dunbar, *Against the Grain*; Robert F. Martin, "A Prophet's Pilgrimage"; Belfrage, *A Faith to Free the People*; Richard Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr*; Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*; Richard Stone, *Paul Tillich's Radical Social Thought*.

4 SNA, March 16, 23, 30, April 6, 13, June 18, 1940. Through the auspices of Claude Williams's People's Institute of Applied Religion, Maxey and West tried to take their teachings directly to the people of Birmingham by holding a series of seminars, but their message of racial equality and class struggle did not find a ready audience (Howard Lee to Claude Williams, October 4, 1940; Alton Lawrence to Claude Williams, July 2, 1941; Williams to Lawrence, July 8, 1941; all in Box 48, SCHW Papers).

5 Helen Fuller to Frank Graham, January 20, 1939, and William McKee to Graham, June 6, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers; James F. Anderson circular letter, June 26, 1940, Box 170, J. B. Matthews Papers; Reed, "The Southern Conference," 59–60; *News of the Young Southerners*, August 29, 1939.

6 Lee to Graham, June 9, 1939; McKee to Graham, June 6, 1939; Howard Kester to Francis Miller, March 19, 1939; Jack Tolbert to Josephine Wilkins, October 19, 1939; all in Box 12, FPG Papers; Reed, "The Southern Conference," 63; Charles H. Martin, "The Rise and Fall of Popular Front Liberalism," 126–27; *News of The Young Southerners*, August 29, 1939; Howard Lee to Frank Graham, November 14, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers; "League of Young Southerners," n.d., typescript, "Council of Young Southerners," n.d., typescript, Box 170, J. B. Matthews Papers.

7 SNA, May 30, July 25, 1940, February 6, March 27, 1941; Malcolm Dobbs to Joe Gelders, March 6, 1940, Box 29, SCHW Papers; Marge Frantz interview with author; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author; FBI Report, "SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama," March 11, 1944, p. 68, File 100–82; Scales and Nickson, *Cause at Heart*, 82.

8 Marge Frantz interview with author; FBI Report, "Margaret Gelders, Washington D.C. Division," April 1, 1942, HQ File 100–20023, sect. 1.

9 DW, August 15, 1936; Memo on Ed Strong, n.d., Box 240, *National Republic* Files; Johnnetta Richards, "The SNYC," 17–18; Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," 38–39; Cicero Hughes, "Toward a Black United Front," 172–73; Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 609–10; Lloyd Brown, "Southern Youth's Heritage."

10 DW, August 15, 1936; James E. Jackson interview with author; SNA, August 7, 1941; quotation from Augusta Strong, "Southern

Youth's Proud Heritage," 41; Augusta V. Jackson [Strong], "A New Deal for Tobacco Workers," 324; FBI Identification Order 2437, "Wanted: James Edward Jackson, Jr.," July 7, 1951; "SNYC—Forum," (OHAL).

11 Quoted in FBI Report, "SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama," March 11, 1944, p. 2, File 100–82; Chicago *Defender*, August 10, 1939; Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," 37, 39; Carl Ross, "Problems of Reconstructing the Young Communist League," *Communist* 16 (July 1937): 662; Johnnetta Richards, "The SNYC," 27–45; Cicero Hughes, "Toward a Black United Front," 146; SW, April 1937; Augusta V. Jackson [Strong], "A New Deal for Tobacco Workers," 322–24, 330; James E. Jackson interview with author; "SNYC—Forum," (OHAL).

12 SNYC, *Official Proceedings, 1938*; "Proclamation of Southern Negro Youth—For Freedom, Equality and Opportunity," leaflet, ca. 1938, Box 2, Stone Collection; Augusta V. Jackson [Strong], "Southern Youth Marches Forward," 170–71, 188–89; Henry Winston, "Freedom, Equality and Opportunity: Southern Negro Youth Congress Charts Road to Progress," *New South* 1 (May 1938): 10–11; "SNYC—Forum," (OHAL); Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," 40; Hudson interview with author; Coke interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 250.

13 "Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference—Tentative Program, April 28–30, 1939, Birmingham, Alabama," mimeo, FBI File 100–82; Circular letter from H. D. Coke, Chairman, Speakers Bureau for SNYC, n.d. [ca. 1939], Birmingham, Alabama, FBI File 100–82; Ed Strong to Olive Stone, March 13, 1939, Box 2, Stone Collection; Coke interview with author.

14 Quotation from Augusta V. Jackson [Strong], "Youth Meets in Birmingham," 178; Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," 42; *New South* 1 (May 1939): 9; Lee Coller, "Not Since Reconstruction: Third All-Southern Negro Youth Conference Shows Awakening of Negro People," *New Masses* 31 (May 30, 1939): 13; Johnnetta Richards, "The SNYC," 118; "SNYC—Forum" (OHAL). As with the SCHW a few months earlier, SNYC's conference had a run-in with Birmingham police. Singer Marian Anderson was scheduled to perform at the conference, but city officials barred her from Constitution Hall where she was to make her appearance.

15 Delegate's quotation from Augusta V. Jackson [Strong], "Youth Meets in Birmingham," 178; Folder, "Youth Council Alabama, 1938–1939," Box E-2, NAACP Papers, Youth Division Files; Ethel Lee Goodman to Juanita Jackson, September 21, 1937, Box G-3, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Johnson quotation from Charles Johnson,

“Source Material for Patterns of Negro Segregation, Birmingham, Alabama,” n.d., memorandum, 19, CMS Collection, reel 5. Birmingham *World* editor Emory O. Jackson recalled in a later interview that black youth were not active at all in the NAACP during the late 1930s. (Emory O. Jackson interview [CRDP], 11).

16 FBI Report, “SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama,” April 24, 1941, p. 6, File 100–79; FBI Report, “SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama,” March 11, 1944, p. 20, File 100–82; Hudson interview with author; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author.

17 SNA, February 6, March 27, 1941; Howard Kester to Francis Miller, March 19, 1939, Box 12, FPG Papers; Marge Frantz interview with author.

18 National Youth Administration, “Study of Employment in Alabama by Race and Sex,” ca. 1937, pp. 1, 4, Box 10, J. E. Bryan, “National Youth Administration, Monthly NYA Narrative Report for State of Alabama,” July 1937, p. 4, Box 1, Records of the National Youth Administration, RG 119; Robert C. Johnson, “Delinquency of Negro Youth in Birmingham,” 12–13; and see John B. Kirby, *Black Americans in the Roosevelt Era*, chap. 9, for a discussion of New Deal-inspired optimism, and Anderson, *Education of Blacks in the South*, 274, for a discussion of increased black college enrollment.

19 Ethel Lee Goodman to Juanita Jackson, September 21, 1937, Box G-3, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Hudson, “Highlights of Some of the United Labor Struggles,” 69; John Williams, “Struggles in the Thirties in the South,” 177; *DW*, February 22, 1938.

20 Sallye B. Davis interview, untranscribed tape, NPHH Collection; Sallye B. Davis interview (BPRM), 1–2; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author. Davis's maiden name was Bell.

21 Esther Cooper Jackson to author, September 15, 1988; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author.

22 Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author; *Cavalcade* 1, no. 2 (May 1941); FBI Report, “SNYC,” August 14, 1947, File 100–6548-291; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAI); James E. Jackson interview with author; FBI Report, “SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama,” April 25, 1942, p. 19, File 100–82; SNA, August 7, 1941.

23 SNA, December 5, 1940; *Cavalcade* 1, no. 1 (April 1941): 3, and no. 2 (May 1941): 3; James E. Jackson interview with author; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author; and for a comparison of the role of quilting in the network of female slaves, see White, *Ar'nt a Woman?* 123.

24 Circular letter from Margie Gelders to Fellow Americans, August

23, 1940, Box 37, SCHW Papers; Marge Frantz interview with author; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author; Patton interview (BPRM), 6. Efforts to increase wives' participation in political work apparently succeeded in a few cases. During the early 1940s Henry O. Mayfield's second wife, Annie Mae, was very active in both SNYC and the ladies' auxiliary of the UMWA in Birmingham (FBI Report, "SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama," March 11, 1944, pp. 34, 75, File 100-82; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author).

25 Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author. Esther Cooper Jackson's assessment holds true for SNYC leaders Louis and Dorothy Burnham, who moved to Birmingham in 1942. (See Epilogue.)

26 Quotation from Marge Frantz interview with author; James E. Jackson interview with author; Hall interview with author. On the concept of "movement culture," see Goodwyn, *The Populist Moment*, xix; and for a discussion of its application to CP internal life, see Lieberman, "People's Songs," 66.

27 Laurent Frantz interview with author; James E. Jackson interview with author; also Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author.

28 Quotation from Augusta V. Jackson [Strong], "Southern Youth Marches Forward," 188; *Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 (June 1941): 2-4; Augusta Strong, "Southern Youth's Proud Heritage," 43; *Chicago Defender*, August 10, 1939; FBI Report, "SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama," April 1, 1941, FBI File 100-82; James E. Jackson interview with author; "SNYC—Forum," (OHAL); SNA, December 5, 1940, January 30, 1941; Johnnetta Richards, "The SNYC," 119-21; FBI Report, "SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama," April 1, 1941, File 100-82.

29 Richards, "The SNYC," 112-13.

30 *Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 (June 1941): 4.

31 *Cavalcade* 1, no. 1 (April 1941): 4. On Cuney see Rampersad, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 114-15.

32 *Cavalcade* 1, no. 4 (October 1941). Cuney added music to "Uncle Sam Says" and it was recorded by Josh White (Greenway, *American Folksongs of Protest*, 106).

33 *Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 (June 1941): 4.

34 *Ibid.*, no. 2 (May 1941): 3.

35 *Ibid.*, no. 3 (June 1941).

36 *Ibid.*, no. 2 (May 1941). The author of "The People to Lincoln,

Douglass,” is identified as A. S., which stands for Augusta Strong, though at the time she used her maiden name Jackson.

37 FBI Report, “SNYC, New Orleans,” April 28, 1940, p. 2, File 61–218; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); *Chicago Defender*, May 18, 1940.

38 FBI Report, “SNYC, New Orleans,” April 28, 1940, p. 2, File 61–218; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); *Chicago Defender*, May 18, June 29, 1940; Johnnetta Richards, “The SNYC,” 91–97. See also NAACP, Birmingham Branch, *Advancement* (Birmingham, 1941), pamphlet; Frederick Morrow to Walter White, March 27, 1940; Memo from Frederick Morrow to Executive Staff, April 4, 1940; all in Box C-1, NAACP Papers, Branch files. In fact, NAACP leader and Birmingham *World* editor Emory O. Jackson was at times somewhat sympathetic to the Communists. James Ford’s 1940 tour of Birmingham was reported quite favorably in the *World*, as was his vice-presidential campaign (Birmingham *World*, October 4, 11, 1940).

39 FBI Report, “SNYC, New Orleans,” April 28, 1940, p. 2, File 61–218; James E. Jackson, *Our Battle for the Ballot*, 8–9.

40 Augusta Strong, “Southern Youth’s Proud Heritage,” 43–44; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); Bunche, “The Political Status of the Negro,” 2:451–52; copy of SNYC pamphlet, *Let Us Vote* (1940), FBI Report, “SNYC, Birmingham, Alabama,” April 1, 1941, File 100–82, sect. 1; James E. Jackson interview with author. Months following the arrests, several black miners formed the Hamilton Slope Young Southerners Youth Club in April 1941. Its vice-chairman was none other than Henry O. Mayfield (*Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 [June 1941]: 1).

41 Edward E. Strong to Joseph Gelders, October 24, 1940, Box 24, SCHW Papers; Birmingham *World*, November 1, 1940; quotation in *SNA*, November 14, 1940.

42 *Cavalcade* 1, no. 2 (May 1941): 2; *SNA*, April 3, 1941.

43 *SNA*, June 5, 1941; FBI Report, “Laurent Frantz, Birmingham Division, January 6, 1942,” p. 5, HQ File 100–20023, sect. 1; FBI Report, “Joe Gelders, Birmingham Division, March 26, 1942,” p. 2, HQ File 61–9512; Birmingham *World*, May 13, 1941.

44 Birmingham *World*, May 13, 1941; see also Johnnetta Richards, “The SNYC,” 100–108.

45 FBI Report, “Laurent Frantz, Birmingham Division,” May 19, 1941, p. 2, HQ File 100–20023; Laurent Frantz interview with author; *SNA*, August 1, 22, 1940; Joseph Gelders to Gifford Cochran, August 23, 1940, and Circular Letter from Margie Gelders, August 23, 1940, Box 37, SCHW Papers; Memorandum from S. K. McKee to J. Edgar Hoover, January 13, 1942, re: Joseph Gelders, FBI HQ File 61–9512.

46 SNA, August 22, 1940; Memorandum from S. K. McKee to J. Edgar Hoover, January 13, 1942, re: Joseph Gelders, FBI HQ File 61–9512; Marge Frantz interview with author. See also “We Challenge the Birmingham Police Department,” handbill, ca. August 1940; Joseph Gelders to Gifford Cochran, August 23, 1940; Circular Letter from Margie Gelders, August 23, 1940; “Statement of Joseph S. Gelders before the Birmingham City Commission, August 20, 1940”; “Statement of the Rev. Malcolm Cotton Dobbs, Executive Secretary of the League of Young Southerners, before the Birmingham City Commission, Tuesday Morning, August 20, 1940”; all in Box 37, SCHW Papers.

47 Joseph Gelders to Gifford Cochran, August 23, 1940, Box 37, SCHW Papers; Laurent Frantz interview with author; Coker et al., *Digest of the Public Record of Communism*, 307.

48 Jefferson Richards, “Nora Wilson was too ‘Uppity,’” *The Review* 5 (December, 1940): 11; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); *Cavalcade* 1, no. 1 (April 1941): 1; quotation from Augusta V. Jackson, “Free at Last,” *Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 (June 1941); James E. Jackson interview with author; Johnnetta Richards, “The SNYC,” 82–83.

49 “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); *Cavalcade* 1, no. 1 (April 1941): 1, and no. 3 (June 1941): 1; SNA, May 1, 1941; *Birmingham World*, May 2, 6, 1941.

50 *Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 (June 1941): 1; SNA, May 1, 1941; *Birmingham World*, May 2, 6, 1941; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL).

51 SNA, February 20, 1941; *Cavalcade* 1, no. 3 (June 1941): 1; Scales and Nickson, *Cause at Heart*, 119–21; SNA, May 22, August 14, 1941; Memorandum re: Joseph Gelders from S. K. McKee to J. Edgar Hoover, January 13, 1942, FBI HQ File 61–9512; Marge Frantz interview with author; SNA, May 22, 29, 1941.

52 SNA, July 3, 10, 1941; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, My 3, 10, 1941. For a discussion of the CPUSA’s response to Germany’s invasion of Russia, see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* chap. 6.

53 Sidney Rittenberg to Frank Graham, August 26, 1941, Box 18, FPG Papers; *Cavalcade* 1, no. 5 (November 1941), and no. 1 (May 1942); FBI Report, “SNYC, Birmingham,” June 17, 1942, p. 3, File 100–82; *DW*, April 22, 26, 1942.

54 SNA, August 21, 1941; *Cavalcade* 1, no. 4 (October 1941): 4–5.

EPILOGUE

1 Painter, *Narrative*, 307.

2 Ibid., 314; Mayfield, "Memoirs"; *DW*, February 6, 1944; Norrell, "Caste in Steel," 679–81; Noel R. Beddow to Mercedes Daughtery, July 27, 1943, Box 1, Taft Papers; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, May 4, 1949; on the Mobile uprising, see Shapiro, *White Violence*, 338–39; National Urban League, "Summary of a Report on the Race Riots in the Alabama Dry Dock and Shipbuilding Company Yards in Mobile, Alabama," typescript, June 25, 1943, BUL Papers. For a brief period during and after the war, the Left in Mobile, which had been virtually nonexistent during the 1930s, had begun to gain a small following under the leadership of maritime union educational director William Zeuch and a local optometrist named Herbert P. McDonald. McDonald founded and presided over the Mobile Council of American-Soviet Friendship (Herbert P. McDonald to SCHW, February 3, 1945, James Dombrowski to Pvt. Robert Hardy, May 11, 1945, Box 18, SCHW Papers).

3 YCL, *Weekly Review*, June 16, 1942; *Cavalcade* 2, no. 1 (May 1942); SNYC, *A Public Appeal to the President*; FBI Report, "SNYC, Washington, D.C.," July 8, 1942, p. 2, File 100–6294; Memo from D. K. Brown, SAC, to Director, December 11, 18, 1943, January 18, 1944, and Memo from R. J. Abbaticchio, Jr., to Director, March 18, 1944, FBI File BH-100–82-1E.

4 Birmingham *World*, October 15, 26, 1943; SNYC Press Release, "Montgomery Citizens Launch Registration Campaign," May 24, 1944, Vertical Files, Moorland-Springarn Research Center; Patton interview (BPRM), 1–2; SNYC, *Proceedings—6th All-Southern Negro Youth Conference*; James E. Jackson interview with author; FBI Report, "SNYC, Birmingham," March 11, 1944, File 100–82.

5 Thelma Dale, "New Currents in the South," *Congress View* 1, no. 7 (December 1943): 6, and 2, no. 6 (September 1944): 7; Oscar Bryant, "Draft Constitution for Rural Clubs," typescript, n.d., NNC Papers, reel 41; FBI Report, "NNC, Birmingham," March 10, 1944, File HQ 61–6728-372, sect. 8; FBI Report, "NNC, Birmingham," September 30, 1944, File HQ 61–6728-434; FBI Report, "NNC, Birmingham," July 18, 1944, File HQ 61–6728-414; FBI Report, "NNC, Birmingham," June 9, 1945, File HQ 61–6728-480.

6 Memo from D. K. Brown to Director, December 18, 1943, Memo from R. J. Abbaticchio, Jr., to Director, March 18, 1944, FBI File 100–82-1E.

7 Hudson interview with author; Painter, *Narrative*, 306–8; Memo from R. J. Abbaticchio, Jr., to Director, June 1, 21, July 18, 1944, FBI File BH 100–82-1E. Hudson's claim that Rob Hall was district organizer when the CP was liquidated is not entirely accurate. Following Browder's Teheran speech on January 7, 1944, in which he

alluded to the possibility of disbanding the Party, Hall discussed Browder's remarks and the CP's future with the Alabama cadre. But by the time it became official policy, May 20, 1944, Hall had already left for the army (Abbaticchio to Director, June 21, 1944, FBI File BH 100-82-1E; Hall interview with author; Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* 184-203).

8 Circular letter from Pauline Dobbs and Rev. D. C. Whitsett, July 18, 1944; Pauline Dobbs to Marge Frantz, August 23, 1944; Pauline Dobbs to James Dombrowski, February 19, 1945; all in Box 18, SCHW Papers; "Organizational Report of Alabama Chapter, July 1944 through December 1944," pp. 5-7, and "Minutes of Meeting of Alabama Chapter, June 30, 1944," Box 42, SCHW Papers; Memo from R. J. Abbaticchio, Jr., to Director, July 3, 18, November 21, December 11, 29, 1944, February 13, 1945, FBI File 100-82-1E.

9 Hudson interview with author; Birmingham *Post*, October 23, 1947; *Alabama*, September 5, 1947; Pauline Dobbs to James Dombrowski, November 14, 1945, Box 18, SCHW Papers; Salmond, "Vanguard of the Civil Rights Movement," 51-60; *Southern Farmer*, August 1945, January, June, October, 1946, April and September, 1947; *Alabama*, December 15, 1950; Circular letter from Aubrey Williams, August 11, 1947, Box 31, SCHW Papers.

10 For a description of the CPUSA in postwar United States, see Isserman, *Which Side Were You On?* 214-47; Starobin, *American Communism in Crisis*; Buhle, *Marxism in the United States*, 194-97.

11 Painter, *Narrative*, 309-10; Marge Frantz interview with author; FBI Internal Security-C Memo, "Justification for Continuation of Technical or Microphone Surveillance: SNYC," December 5, 1946, File 100-82-1E.

12 "The Communist Party's Economic and Political Program for the South," typescript, 1945, 1-7, Box 14, Minor Papers. On the revival of the black belt theory in 1946, see Haywood, *Black Bolshevik*, 548-59, and Haywood, *Negro Liberation*; Frank Scott, "An Inquiry," 103-26; William Z. Foster et al., *Communist Position on the Negro Question*; and the string of articles published in *Political Affairs* between 1946 and 1950.

13 Malcolm Dobbs to Clark Foreman, June 8, 1946; Martin Knowlton to James Dombrowski, June 27, 1946; Malcolm Dobbs to Dombrowski, June 10, 1946, "Our Men Fought for the Right to Vote," handbill, January 1946, quotation from Malcolm Dobbs to Dombrowski, May 7, 1946; all in Box 3, SCHW Papers; Committee for Alabama Press Release, "County School Board Undercuts Democracy in Fight against Court Decree to Equalize Pay of County School

Teachers,” n.d., ca. 1948, Box 17, SCHW Papers; on the Boswell Amendment see, *Birmingham World*, January 11, 1949; *Birmingham News*, March 28, November 19, 20, 1949, January 22, 29, 1950; *Alabama*, September 6, 1946; Vera Chandler Foster, “‘Boswellianism’”; Lawson, *Black Ballots*, 90–93; on Folsom's 1946 progressive agenda, see Sims, *The Little Man's Big Friend*, 80–82; Grafton, “James E. Folsom and Civil Liberties”; *Alabama*, March 22, 1946.

14 Scales and Nickson, *Cause at Heart*, 162, 192; *Birmingham World*, May 9, 1947; *Alabama*, April 4, 1947. Ross's efforts to create a public presence in the South is also discussed in Korstad, “The Communist Party in Winston-Salem.” Communists in the CIO and SNYC, however, did not reveal their Party membership, although they publicly opposed any efforts to outlaw the CPUSA. See for example, Internal Security-C, Memo, “Justification for Continuation of Technical or Microphone Surveillance: SNYC,” December 5, 1946, FBI File 100–82–1E.

15 Alabama General Assembly, Senate *Journal*, Regular Session, 1947, 1:92, 370; *Alabama*, August 8, 1947; Memo on Report of HUAC from National Office, SCHW, no. 019230, Edmonia Grant to Don West, September 5, 1947, Box 11, SCHW Papers; U.S. Congress, House, Un-American Activities, *Committee Report on the Southern Conference for Human Welfare*. See also Carey E. Haigler to John Brophy, March 9, 1948; W. S. Hixon and Hosea Hudson to Brophy, n.d.; Eugene Wells to Brophy, April 6, 1948; Communication from W. S. Hixon, Secretary, Local 2815, to Alabama State Industrial Union Council, November 26, 1947, Resolution of Local 660-B, UPW-CIO, n.d.; Resolution of Local 1700, USA-CIO, n.d.; all in Box 6, CIO Records; Reuben Fair to Philip Murray, December 1, 1947, Box 1, Taft Papers; *DW*, December 14, 1947; *Birmingham News*, March 3, 1948; FBI Report, “Hosea Hudson, Birmingham,” September 13–15, 1948, pp. 4–5, File 100–743 fc. After being driven out of the CIO, the Dobbses worked for the SCHW in Mobile for a few months before moving to Texas in 1948 (Malcolm Dobbs to Edmonia Grant, July 7, 1947; Pauline Dobbs to Edmonia Grant, December 5, 1947; Grant to Pauline Dobbs, December 9, 1947; all in Box 17, SCHW Papers).

16 Stetson Kennedy, “Interview with Dr. E. P. Pruitt, KKK, Birmingham, Alabama,” August 16, 1946 (typescript), Box 1, Kennedy Papers; *Alabama*, February 25, 1949; Wayne Clark, “An Analysis,” 8–41; Norrell, “Labor at the Ballot Box,” 14–15; quotation from *Southern Labor Review*, April 7, 1948. One survey conducted in the 1950s concluded that Southerners were more anti-Communist than the rest of the country (Stouffer, *Communism, Conformity, and Civil Liberties*,

17 “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); SNYC, “The Battle of Birmingham,” (typescript, 1948), Box 21, SCHW Papers; *Birmingham Age Herald*, May 1, 3, 1948; *Sunday Worker*, May 9, 16, 1948; *Birmingham Post*, April 9, 26, 1948; *Birmingham News*, May 3, 1948; *Birmingham World*, April 13, 16, May 1, 4, 7, 1948; Coke interview (WLC), 12–13; Memo from G. D. King to Director, April 28, 1948, FBI File 100–82; Records Court, City of Birmingham, Transcript of Case No. 53989, *City of Birmingham v. Glen Taylor: Remarks of Honorable Oliver B. Hall*, May 4, 1948 mimeo, copy in Box 21, SCHW Papers; Johnnetta Richards, “The SNYC,” 186–98.

18 Quotation from *Birmingham World*, January 2, 1948; *Birmingham World*, February 6, 16, 1948; Daniel Byrd, assistant field secretary to Gloster B. Current, director of branches, September 26, 1949, Box C-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Noel Gaines to Governor Jim Folsom, March 23, 1948, Drawer 235, Governor Folsom Papers; Mrs. Ora H. Thornton to Governor Jim Folsom, January 25, 1948, Drawer 244, Governor Folsom Papers.

19 *Southern Farmer*, April, September, 1948; Hudson interview with author; Sullivan, “Gideon’s Southern Soldiers,” 248–49; *Alabama*, September 3, 1948; Emory O. Jackson, Chairman of Research Committee, “Proposed Alabama Progressive Democratic Association,” typescript, June 19, 1948, p. 3, Box C-2, NAACP Papers, Branch Files; Painter, “Hosea Hudson and the Progressive Party”; Loveman, *Presidential Vote in Alabama*, 23.

20 “Report of the President of the Alabama State Industrial Union Council, Period from March 1, 1949 to March 1, 1950,” typescript, March 1, 1950, pp. 1, 5, Box 2, Taft Papers; *Birmingham Age-Herald*, May 29, 1949; *Birmingham Post-Herald*, September 4, 1950, *Birmingham World*, May 12, 1949; *Proceedings of the Alabama State Industrial Union Council, Ninth Constitutional Convention, CIO, 1948*, typescript, n.d., 271–74, Box 2, Taft Papers; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, May 4, 1949; for a discussion of Mine Mill’s expulsion and its violent aftermath, see especially, Huntley, “The Rise and Fall of Mine Mill,” 7–13; Huntley, “Iron Ore Miners,” 110–69; *Alabama (CIO) News Digest*, April 27, May 18, 25, 1949; Underwood interview (WLC), 2–3; Jensen, *Nonferrous Metals Industry Unionism*, 233–38; Hudson, “Struggle against Philip Murray’s Racist Policies,” 55–57.

21 Connor, “Birmingham Wars on Communism,” 37–38; Anne McCarty Braden to Cooper Green, July 18, 1950, Folder 6.18, Green Papers; Home, *Communist Front!* 195; Coker et al., *Digest of the Public Record of Communism*, 384–86; Alabama General Assembly, House *Journal, Regular Session, 1951*, 1:1106, 2:2483; *DW*, May 30, July 17,

1950; *Sunday Worker*, June 26, 1949; Hudson interview with author.

22 Hudson interview with author; Esther Cooper Jackson interview with author; “SNYC—Forum,” (OHAL); William Patterson to Asbury Howard, August 4, 1952, Howard to Patterson, August 7, 1952, reel 4, CRC Papers; Horne, *Communist Front?* 195; Confidential Memorandum from Herbert Hill to Walter White, May 8–17, 1953, Box 6, CIO Records.

23 Carson, *In Struggle*, 162–65; Carmichael and Hamilton, *Black Power*, 98–103; Smith interview with author, July 12, 1989.

24 Smith interview with author, July 12, 1989; Carson, *In Struggle*, 300–301.

25 Painter, *Narrative*; Rosengarten, *All God's Dangers*; conversation with Nell Irvin Painter; Jennifer Hadley to author, April 27, 1989; Frank Rich, “Out of the Old South, the Word of a Witness,” *New York Times*, October 23, 1989; NAARPR postcard and miscellaneous pamphlets in author's possession; “A Celebration of 50 Years of Southern Struggle and a Vision for the 21st Century,” flyer, n.d., and “What SOC Is,” flyer, n.d., both in author's possession. I am indebted to Anne Braden for providing information about the Southern Organizing Committee and to a Birmingham activist, who shall remain nameless, for information about the NAARPR and the Paul Robeson Club. As this book went to press, the Birmingham NAARPR was engaged in a fight to remove Johnny Imani Harris from Alabama's death row. Harris was eventually released three years after the publication of *Hammer and Hoe*.

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